

Marxism and The Bhagvat Geeta

S. G. Sardesai

Dilip Bose

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PREFACE

As the readers will find, the articles collectively entitled, *Marxism and the Bhagvat Geeta* were not planned together.

Bhagavad-Gita and Our National Movement was read as a paper presented by the author to a seminar on "Indology and Marxism". It was subsequently elaborated by him in consultation with our late, revered comrade, Dr G. Adhikari, and Prof Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, and brought out as an independent pamphlet.

"The Riddle of the Geeta" was intended to be an introduction to the second edition of the pamphlet, but actually became an independent article by itself.

"The Peculiarities of Hinduism" was written as a helpful accompaniment to both the other articles.

We hope the collection, taken together, will be found useful and will be thankful to the readers for comments and criticism which we may receive from them.

The articles can, and probably will raise a controversy. We consider it necessary and desirable in the ideological-political struggle against the forces of Hindu communalism and national chauvinism.

New Delhi,
20.6.1982

S. G. SARDESAI
DILIP BOSE

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THE RIDDLE OF THE GEETA

THIS ARTICLE was intended to be an introduction to *Bhagavad-Gita and Our National Movement* by Comrade Dilip Bose. But the roots and branches of the main problem raised by his essay are so far-reaching that the introduction took the form of an independent article by itself. With his consent, therefore, it was decided that the second edition of his pamphlet should be brought out as a symposium of two papers written by the two authors. In fact, one more article has been added to the collection. I am thankful to Comrade Dilip for giving me this opportunity.

And what is the problem? It is this that during the last fifteen hundred years and more, the *Geeta* (for short) has acquired an influence and authority in the social, religious and ethical life of Hindus, even greater than the far more ancient and "revealed" *Vedas*. At the same time, it has been put to numberless and divergent interpretations by its avowed votaries and champions.

Why and how could this happen? What are the positive and negative aspects of this poetic, religious treatise which lay it open to various and even conflicting interpretations by different people in different times and conditions? Are these interpretations bounded by a certain social and ideological framework, or can the *Geeta* be stretched to derive any and all meanings from it?

A CONTRADICTIONARY TREATISE

For instance, during our freedom movement, most of our patriotic (Hindu) leaders drew inspiration from the *Geeta* for re-discovering our national identity and for rousing the self-respect, self-confidence and spirit of suffering and sacrifice of the people. They harnessed the *Geeta* to the cause of anti-imperialism. Contrarily, in the post-independence period, the very same *Geeta* is being put into the reverse gear on a massive scale.

Growingly, it has become a very important ideological weapon of Indian reaction for fighting all progressive and radical forces by injecting superstitious, mystical, fatalist ideas, and even communal poison, in the minds of the people. Why?

To proceed, the Adya Shankaracharya saw in the *Geeta* the message of "spiritual" knowledge and renunciation (*jnana* and *sanyasa*). To Chaitanya, Jnaneshwar and other illustrious saint-poets, the *Geeta* meant *bhakti*, unconditional submission to God steeped in love and devotion. For Lokmanya Tilak, it mirrored *karma-yoga*, action without the slightest desire for results. In fact, for Tilak, the *Geeta* also taught *shatham prati shaathyam*, which means paying the villain in his own coin. In contrast, for Mahatma Gandhi the *Geeta* spelt Truth, unsullied even by the thought of violence, combined with resistance to evil.

Fantastic as it may seem, the British rulers, too, in their own way, were "votaries" of the *Geeta*! It convinced them that Indians were too "spiritual" and other-worldly to be fit for any material pursuits, and hence for political power.

Still further, Golwalkar "learnt" from the *Geeta* that Muslims were aliens in this country and deserved to be methodically slaughtered every few months. Deoras is carrying forward his noble heritage! A living Shankaracharya declared in Poona, a few years ago, that women and shudras must be despised, because, according to the *Geeta* they were "born of sin" (*paapa yoni*). To top it all, Rajneesh and the Krishna Consciousness Society have even discovered "permissiveness" and "free love" in the Song Celestial!

What is all this jumble? How is one to make head or tail out of it? How is a rational person who may be prepared to respect the *Geeta* but not prepared to mortgage his intelligence to its "fathomless wisdom" to make any sense out of such a scrambled egg?

MAIN RESPONSIBILITY

The responsibility for all this confusion lies on the eclectic, inconsistent and even self-contradictory positions on the *Geeta* itself.

It lies squarely on the shoulders of the great "Bhagavan" Shri

Krishna, who, while philosophising over the unreality of death because of the immortality of the soul, and glorifying the "perfect" man (*sthitapraina*) who lives a life beyond good and evil, compelled poor Arjuna, who loved his kith and kin, to butcher them without the slightest compunction. Indeed, when despite all ponderous sermonising, Arjuna refused to budge an inch, Shri Krishna overawed him by *Vishwa Roopa Darshana*, i.e., by opening his own mouth in which Arjuna saw the entire universe operating according to the will and command of Shri Krishna!! Only then was Arjuna moved to commit the ghastly crime.

The responsibility lies on the shoulders of Shri Krishna who, while insisting that the Supreme Power and Ultimate Reality were property-less and formless (*nirguna, nirakara*) also claimed that he himself, a human being in flesh and blood, and a charioteer at that, was the Supreme God to whom *alone* Arjuna owed unquestioning obedience.

The responsibility lies on the shoulders of Shri Krishna who talked tall about action without the desire for results (II. 47)¹ while offering to Arjuna the allurements of heaven (of course, in the company of celestial damsels and a bowl of wine!) if he was killed, and an empire if he became victorious. (II. 37)

And the joke of it all is that, in the end (XI. 33), Shri Krishna even assured Arjuna that He had already killed the entire enemy forces and that Arjuna was nothing but the apparent cause of their impending disaster! What a great God that inspires heroism in such a frightened Arjuna, and what a great warrior that attacks an enemy that has already been demolished!

A hundred such glaringly incompatible and even ludicrous positions can be discerned in the *Geeta*. We will spare the reader further illustrations.

With all this, however, we come no nearer the solution of the riddle. And that is this, that how could such an inconsistent and egoistical compendium inspire so many people in our

1. The Roman figure in brackets indicates the number of the canto, and the Arabic numeral the number of the verse in the canto, of the *Geeta*.

history to love humanity, to yearn for the uplift of the lowly and the meek? How could it give them faith for a determined pursuit of the mission of their life? Why did our early revolutionaries face the gallows with the *Geeta* in their hands? How has such a treatise gripped the minds of crores of Indians for centuries and continues to do so even now?

No amount of abstract logic or pedantic hair-splitting can solve this riddle. It can be disentangled only if we approach it from the standpoint of the historical conditions in which the *Geeta* was born, and the historical aims it tried to achieve. Only then can we see that its incongruities are but a subservient part of the consistency which runs through it like a red thread.

THE UPANISHADS

The *Geeta* was compiled, roughly, somewhere between the beginning of the Christian era and 250 A.D.² To understand it,

2. The periodisation of Indian ancient and early medieval history (i.e. up to the arrival of the Arabs, Afghans, Turks, etc.) has been, and continues to be a headache. The first requisite for the writing of history is reliable data regarding events and their time and place. Such data regarding Indian history is not available up to the "Muslim" period (with the exception of Alexander's invasion, not to be found in Indian records). Secondly, India's socio-economic developments up to the arrival of the British was so extraordinarily gradual, that the dividing line between one period and the next has to be anywhere between two to three hundred years. This means that, strict chronology apart, there is a tremendous overlapping even in the socio-economic periods of Indian history. Thirdly, historical development in the various regions of the country took place very unevenly. I use the term "period", not in a strict, chronological sense, but to indicate the development of productive forces in India. Thus, by the "Rig Vedic period", I mean the time when Indo-Aryan society (again, a term that is neither scientifically correct nor happy) was dominantly pastoral and nomadic. By the "Brahmana-Upanishadic period", I understand the time when it was in transition from pastoralism to agriculture and handicrafts. And by the "Magadha period" I understand the time when it had become fully based on agriculture, handicrafts, and naturally, trade. Chronologically speaking, this would mean, roughly, from 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C., from 1000 B.C. to 600 B.C., and from 600 B.C. to 200 B.C. The *Geeta* comes clearly after the Magadha period.

however, it is necessary to go back to the Upanishadic period and trace subsequent historical developments up to the time when the *Geeta* was born.

During the Upanishadic period, class struggle in the form of the conflict between the shudras, and very considerably, the vaishyas, on one side, and the brahmins and kshatriyas, on the other, became very sharp. The "civil" condition of the shudras and those beyond them (the chandalas, etc.) was horrible. They were just chattel, not human beings, liable to be beaten or killed at the will of the master. The vaishyas, though not exploited and oppressed like the shudras, were thoroughly fleeced by the upper two *varnas*.

Tribal chieftains and kings, and in certain cases, oligarchic tribal republics also emerged in the period. This meant the undermining of egalitarian tribal customs and traditions, though, due to very slow economic development, not their elimination.

In the sphere of what must be called socio-religious life the *Upanishads* developed the interconnected theories of the *atma*, the *brahma*, *karma*, *punarjanma* and *moksha*. This entire system of ideas was of a crass class character.

What it meant in actual life was that the brahmins and kshatriyas were lords of heaven and earth because they had performed meritorious deeds in their previous birth, while the shudras and vaishyas had to sweat and toil for those above them because of sins committed in their previous life.

As for attaining liberation in after-life the only path advocated by the *Upanishads* was the *jnana marg*. This meant a monopoly of the *Vedas* and deep meditation (preferably combined with an ascetic life) for realising the unity of the individual soul (*atma*) with the cosmic soul (*brahma*). Since this path was reserved exclusively for brahmins and kshatriyas, there is, really speaking, no liberation at all for vaishyas and shudras in the *Upanishads*. Theirs was to do and die, with the hope of a lift on the *varna* ladder in the next life.

The ruling *varnas* in the Rig-Vedic-Upanishadic period were brutally heartless and merciless. War, plunder and violence was their creed. There is no room for love, compassion and

pity anywhere in the *Rig Veda* or the *Upanishads*. Timur could very well have been a *chela* of the most powerful of Rig-Vedic Gods, Indra, in the matter of carrying fire and sword into the "enemy" camp.

THE MAGADHA PERIOD

This civilisation, gradually advancing in the Gangetic valley, reached Magadha (South Bihar) around 700 B.C. to 500 B.C. There it discovered iron ore on a scale unimaginable and undreamt of up to the end of the Upanishadic period. In fact, it was the discovery of iron on such a scale, and the forging of iron tools, implements and weapons on an unprecedented scale, that is the basic dividing line between the Upanishadic and Magadha periods. I would go further and call it the Great Divide in the long history of ancient and medieval India.

Though the subject matter of this article is religion and religious institutions, it is necessary, briefly, to explain the *gigantic change in every sphere of social life* that resulted from the acquisition of iron deposits on a vast scale, in the Magadha period. Besides, religious theories and institutions, which provide the rationale and binding ideological force of pre-capitalist societies, are themselves the product of all-round socio-economic development. Their real meaning and significance cannot be understood except in the context of, and in relation to, such development. The treatment of religion cannot be limited to the treatment of religion. The ancient Indian definition of religion *Dhaarayati iti Dharmah*, is very meaningful. It means, "Religion is what supports, what holds together (society)."

Iron meant the production of axes, pickaxes, spades, ploughshares, nails, metallic rims for cart wheels, tools and instruments of innumerable new handicrafts, swords, and so on. The development of some rudimentary chemical processes leading, for instance, to better tanning of leather and leather products, was inevitable. The blower improved the production of iron.

Jungles and forests were cleared. Agriculture improved, combined with a great expansion in area. Roads were built, better and bigger ships were constructed, trade and transport

expanded by leaps and bounds. Money economy, real towns and cities in the place of overgrown villages, followed suit. Population increased very much faster with the growing means of subsistence; there was a vast expansion of the geographical area of civilisation.

Radical political changes, a change in the institutions and practice of administration, became inevitable and necessary. The small, Upanishadic tribal kingdoms and republics, based on tribal loyalties, began to be replaced by territorial kingdoms. The new economy demanded powerful, centralised states as driving instruments of hothouse development. The Magadha state directly took over important spheres of industry and trade. All sorts of taxes were introduced, a vast, paid civil administration was created. Swords, spears and shields began to replace bows, arrows and the mace as the main weapons of war. Standing armies—cavalry and infantry—replaced the earlier kshatriyas going to war in their chariots. Most of the kings of the Magadha period were upstart, military adventurers, not noble kshatriyas by birth. No wonder, the holy brahmin priesthood declared, *Nandaantam Kshatriya Kulam* (the kshatriya nobility and rulers end with the Nandas).

The cultural and political centre of the country naturally shifted from the Upanishadic Mathura—Hastinapura—Indraprastha area to Rajagriha and Pataliputra. This entire development reached its height in the great Mauryan empire, reaching its climax in the reign of Ashoka, when the borders of his realm included Orissa, Madura and Gandhara. This brings us to around 200 B.C.

Brahmi, the first script of the Indo-Aryans, evolved and developed in the Magadha period. The systematic development of science, in particular, medicine, astronomy and mathematics, also begins in the same era.

All these developments could not but have a tremendous impact on socio-religious life and intellectual speculation and enquiry: The Magadha period brought in a great social ferment, I would even say, social “movements”.

What was the focal point of this ferment? It was the questioning of the social structure and the religious ideas and ins-

stitutions of Upanishadic society. *Chaturvarnya* (the basic four-caste system), the infallibility of the *Vedas*, *brahma*, *atma*, the *yajna*, the theory of *karma*, *rebirth* and *moksha*—all were brought under the anvil, everything was challenged.

One has to realise that Upanishadic society, apart from its specific structure, was numerically, and in its geographical expanse, very much smaller than Magadhan society. Its structure and ideology just could not cope with the vaster and far more complex Magadhan society.

ROLE OF EARLY BUDDHISM

The main vehicle and symbol of the new ferment was Buddhism. Actually, the ferment was much broader in its sweep, but it was, no doubt, typified in Buddhism. That is why, from a socio-ideological point of view, the Magadha period is also referred to as the Buddhist period.

Shudras, untouchables, the mass of the vaishyas, various primitive tribes, dasas (slaves), hired workers, tenants and even "free" peasants were subjected to varied and innumerable forms of bondage, forced labour, levies and taxes, inequality, oppression, and so on. Whatever the form of exploitation the lot of all of them was one of hunger, privation and back-breaking toil. To an extent the lot of the shudras improved in comparison with the Upanishadic period, since, in the vast, new society it was neither possible nor necessary to treat them as biped animals.

Inevitably, social misery, pain and sorrow increased. There was such a tremendous ramification of castes (for reasons into which we cannot go here), that theory apart, it became difficult to distinguish the peripheral sub-castes of one *varna* from the peripheral sub-castes of the next nearest *varna*. There were lower sub-castes of brahmins which the higher brahmin priesthood would not recognise as brahmins. There were those who claimed to be kshatriyas but whom the brahmin priesthood stigmatised as shudras. As we know, these tussles continue down to our day.

It was the intensely human prince Gautama (coming from a petty tribal principality in which egalitarian tribal traditions were still surviving), later to become world-famous as the

Buddha, that came forward to evolve some order out of this social medley and misery.

Inevitably, the first thing he had to, and did challenge, was the infallibility of the *Vedas*, the indispensable pillar of Upanishadic brahmin domination. And he also came out against *brahma*, *atma* and the caste system.

Buddha also came out against violence, and as a crusader for *ahimsa*, compassion and humanism. In this connection it has to be realised that the *yajna* sacrifices, vehemently opposed by Buddha, involved slaughtering of cattle and horses on a big scale. That was allright in a pastoral society, but utterly uneconomical in a society that had passed on to agriculture and trade.

Naturally, what was opposed had to be replaced with something. Society cannot live and function in a void. It has to have some kind of material and spiritual binding force.

So Buddha propounded that the world was never created, it always existed and would continue to exist in a state of perpetual change, according to its laws of change.

He propounded, and correctly, that men once lived a life of equality and brotherhood. Then came greed, avarice, violence and private property leading to misery, sorrow and pain.

So what was the way out? First, lead a life of virtue and truthfulness, and also, and that was important, form *sanghas* whose members would own no property and give up all caste distinctions and inequality.

Buddhism was superior to the Upanishadic socio-religious structure in yet another respect. It was open to all as equals, and to individuals as individuals. In the other structure, there was no scope for entry by individuals, everyone was born in a given caste, and hence the shudras and vaishyas could not rise and become equals of brahmins and kshatriyas.

To this end, Buddha laboured tirelessly all his long life. What else were his endless wanderings and sermons if not what, today, we call a *pada-yatra* and mass campaign? Would it, therefore, be wrong to call early Buddhism a movement?

There were others even more radical than Buddha. There was the sect of Ajit Kesha Kambli. There were the Lokayats,

far more daring both in the sphere of philosophy and in the denunciation of the caste system. But I must proceed.

Buddhism never became a mass religion in India, but it became powerful enough to shake up the social, ideological and spiritual domination of Vedic-Upanishadic-Brahmanical religion. Upanishadic religion, in its classical form, could never again be revived in India.

The reasons for the decline of Buddhism are relevant to our subject and may be briefly stated.

Firstly, Buddha's experiment of the *sanghas*, with no castes and no personal property, was utopian and could not but go the way of all utopias, since they are not based on the reality of contemporary historical conditions.

Secondly, despite the fact that Buddha himself took a compromising position on most issues, a religion avowedly based on atheism and clearly leaning on materialism could not hold on to its theoretical tenets for long. God, superstition, religion, the longing for salvation, are primarily the product of man's weakness in the face of nature, and the weakness of the toiling, exploited masses in the face of the exploiting, oppressing, governing classes. So long as these conditions exist, neither God nor superstition nor religion can die. In fact, even after the social liberation of the toilers, after a substantially increased human control over nature, and after society, generally, develops a scientific outlook on life, God and religion take a long time to wither away. The experience of the socialist countries proves that this is a very protracted, difficult process.

Thirdly, caste in India is at once a social, religious and economic organisation. Even modern industrialisation has only succeeded in weakening the caste system, not eradicating it. In Buddha's times, it was altogether impossible. Buddhism was blunted in the face of that impregnable fortress.

And, lastly, like all religions, it ended by becoming subservient to the lords of property and political power. In fact, the Buddhist priesthood itself rolled down into the mire of luxury, pomp and all the degeneracies of a parasitical life.

Buddha himself was turned by the Buddhist priests into a God incarnate, an *Avatar*. The doors of the atheistic religion

were thrown open to magic, idolatry and even hobgoblins. One thing Buddhism did, which stayed. And that was that it gave the ignorant, poor masses the hope of salvation which had been utterly denied to them by Upanishadic society, which did not even consider them human.

POST-MAGADHA DEVELOPMENTS

The next great empire after the Mauryans comes with the "classical" empire of the Guptas, after 300 A.D. But the period between 200 B.C. to 300 A.D., in which the *Geeta* was born, has also interesting and significant features.

This period witnessed great foreign invasions from the north-west, mainly, those of the Indo-Greeks, the Shakas and the Kushanas. Contending kingdoms within the country, those of the Shungas, the Shatavahanas, Kalinga, etc., also came on the scene.

Trade and industry continued to expand. Cultural, economic, and intellectual intercourse between India, the Roman Empire, West and Central Asia, and China developed phenomenally. Science, sculpture and architecture received a tremendous impetus. For some centuries, India's "centre" shifted from Pataliputra to Taxila (Taksha Shila).

At the same time, certain features of disintegration also came on the scene. The Mauryans may have fallen due to foreign incursions. But that, really, was the last straw on the camel's back. It was one thing to build a vast and mighty empire by highly centralised, hot-house methods. Given the extant means of transport and communications, and the costs of a highly centralised state apparatus, it was a very different thing to make such an empire a stable entity. The Magadha state reached its pinnacle in the reign of Ashoka, but that also exposed its Achilles heel, viz. that it was extraordinarily centralised and top heavy. It had over-reached itself, considering the technological limitations of the period. The fissures in Ashoka's empire started in his own life time. It did not take long to crumble under the hammer-blows of new, ambitious military adventurers. In a way, therefore, the post-Mauryan period is one of political conflict and disintegration, despite the fact that kingdoms of the Kushanas, Shakas, Shatavahanas, etc. were by no means small.

From a social point of view, also, a very peculiar situation developed in this period. Upanishadic religion had been given a body-blow by Buddhism from which it could not and did not recover. But, while Buddhism was powerful enough to weaken the socio-religious bonds of Upanishadic society, it did not, despite the efforts of Ashoka, create new bonds that would bind society from top to bottom. Besides, it had itself degenerated.

It has also to be borne in mind that the Shaka and Kushana invasions were not like those of the Persian king Cyrus or Alexander. They were not invasions of armies composed of professional soldiers. They were a massive, tribal immigration into India. This phenomenon was bound to seriously disturb the caste structure in the country, as also *chaturvarnya*, which had already become rather notional in the Magadha period. This meant *Varna-Sankara*, the great bugbear of the *Smritis*, at which the *Geeta* also looked with horror.

Call it a socio-religious ideological void, call it social (not economic and political) anarchy, a peculiar social interregnum did develop after the end of the Magadha period. The old had faded, the new was yet to be born. Considering the stage of social evolution of the times, a very much renovated, though not a new religion was clearly needed.

GEETA, THE BIBLE OF A RENOVATED RELIGION

The bible of that religion was the *Geeta*.

This religion reached its full development in the Gupta period (300 to 500 A.D.). It was based and woven around the *Smritis*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Geeta* (which needs distinct mention though it was made a part of the *Mahabharata*) and the *Puranas*. The *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, in fact, received their final shape and content under the Guptas.

It is this religion that is the Hinduism that has come down to our own days.³

3. It must be noted that the terms "Hindu", "Hinduism" and "Hindusthan" did not come into vogue until the arrival of the Muslims, four or five centuries later. It was they who introduced this nomenclature. It is amusing that the champions of Hindu Rashtra should take pride in calling themselves Hindus!

WHAT DID THE GEETA DO?

A point of no substantial importance, but blown out of all proportion by the adorers of the *Geeta*, may be disposed of here. Was the Shri Krishna of the *Geeta* a real historical figure?

Obviously, he could not be, for the legendary Shri Krishna with his miraculous exploits, some praiseworthy, others not very much so, could not exist in India around the beginning of the Christian era.

But that is of little significance. In ancient times, in all countries, social imagination gave birth to certain personalities if contemporary social organisation had a need for them.

Did Indra really exist? And yet Rig Vedio society is inconceivable without Indra. And now, even the historicity of Christ has come into dispute.

So, whoever blew the trumpet of the *Geeta* was Shri Krishna. That should suffice for a scientific treatment of the subject.

In the fourth canto of the *Geeta* (verse 7) Shri Krishna declares, "Whenever Dharma becomes moribund and Adharma raises its head, I come on the scene, in age after age." And for what? "For the re-establishment of Dharma" (IV. 8). With all its egoism, this statement reflected the reality of the situation. The confusion in the *chaturvarnya* hierarchy created by Buddhism and the Shaka-Kushana invasions was what the writer of the *Geeta* had in mind when he speaks of "Adharma raising its head".

Before going into details, the historical achievement of the *Geeta* should be stated in a nutshell.

WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BASIC POSITION OF THE UPANISHADS, THE GEETA MODIFIED AND SYNTHESISED VARIOUS SUBSEQUENT TRADITIONS AND VIEWS TO SUIT THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROPERTY-OWNING, GOVERNING CLASSES.

Such an attempt was bound to have two features. On the one hand, its consistency lay in defending the material and ideological needs of the ruling class. On the other, its incongruities mirrored its effort to bring about a forced synthesis of

diverse traditions and views, which could no longer be ignored.

Let us now illustrate and elaborate this generalised characterisation of the historical role of the *Geeta*.

The *Geeta* reasserts, categorically and unambiguously, the divine validity of *chaturvarnya* and the theological idealism of the *Upanishads*: *brahma*, *atma*, and the merging of the *atma* into *brahma* for attaining *moksha* (ultimate salvation).

"Chaturvarnya has been created by Me" (IV. 13), and "Me" means the personalised incarnation of God, Shri Krishna. Hence, no nonsense is to be tolerated as regards basic positions! The only change is that *chaturvarnya*, instead of being created by *brahma*, *purusha*, *praiapati*, etc. is now created by a God in human form, a point to which we will come in a moment.

The venerable, holy and "natural" (*svabhaavaja*) duties of the brahmin, and the equally heroic "natural" duties of the kshatriya, as a ruler, are clearly laid down in the eighteenth canto.

To the "natural" duties of the vaishyas, trade is added to agriculture and rearing cattle. Trade had little significance up to the *Upanishads*.

It is on the "natural" duties of the shudra, however, that the *Geeta* lays the maximum and most merciless emphasis.

"Service is the natural action (duty) of the Shudra" (XVIII. 44).⁴

As though this mandatory verdict were not enough, time and again, the *Geeta* reiterates that nothing is higher than the observance of one's duties as prescribed by the divine laws of *chaturvarnya*, and nothing more heinous than their breach.

"It is glory to die in the observance of one's own Dharma, but the Dharma of others is a horror", pontificates the Supreme, Divine Shri Krishna (III. 35, XVIII. 45, XVIII. 47, etc.).

In fact, it goes further and enjoins that no confusion and doubts must be created in the minds of the ignorant in the

4. The word for duty used in the *Geeta* is *karma*, which literally means action. It has to be noted that in the *Geeta*, the word *karma* is used overwhelmingly to mean action (duty) as laid down by the system of *chaturvarnya*. The word *dharma* is also used as a synonym for duty as laid down by the laws of *chaturvarnya*.

performance of their duties (III. 24). So, if you "incite" the shudras, you are done for!

Thus, the screw is tightened on whatever social "laxities" (*adharmā*) had been created by Buddhism and the disturbed conditions of the post-Magadha period.

The defenders of the *Geeta* point out that according to the *Geeta*, *chaturvarnya* was created in accordance with the qualities and actions of the individual (IV. 13). Even so, it was a class-divided, exploitative social structure. But if it were really so, *varna* and caste ought not to have been determined by birth. The *Geeta* does not say that those who have the mentality and habits of menials are to be treated as shudras. It clearly states that shudras have the "natural" mentality of servants. So one is a shudra before one becomes a menial. This means that shudras were shudra by birth, not because of any inherent servile traits or mentality.

Apart from tightening the chains of servitude on the shudras, the *Geeta* displays a revolting contempt for the lower orders and women from beginning to end.

Women, vaishyas and shudras are bracketed together with the chandalas as those that are born of sin (IX. 32).

Further, the *Geeta* says that when a person reaches the stage of a *sthitaprajna* he becomes *sama darshi*. And then he looks upon a learned brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a chandala as equal (V. 18). So one has to reach the sublime stage of a *sthitaprajna* to be able to look at a chandala, a dog and a brahmin as equal! And going by all ancient scriptures not one in a million had the capacity to reach that stage.

This clearly means that in the reality of earthly life, the higher orders did not consider a chandala and a brahmin equal as human beings. And since, further, a chandala is also bracketed with a dog, this means that the higher orders considered a chandala and a dog as being on the same footing in mundane life. Such is the injunction of the Great Bhagavan Shri Krishna, nothing less than the incarnation of Vishnu on earth! Comment is needless.

All these positions notwithstanding, the fact remained that the time of the *Geeta* was not the time of the *Upanishads*. Tons of water had flowed down the Ganges in the eight or nine

centuries intervening between the two. In the interval, Buddhism, and sects even more radical than Buddhism, had raised the voice of the lower orders, preached *ahimsa*, compassion, love for the lowly, and so on. The effect of the mass popularised slogans of *ahimsa paramo dharmah*, *dayaa hi paramo dharmah*, could not just be washed away. "Intelligent adjustments" (of course, in the interest of the rich and the powerful) had become unavoidable.

So, while bracketing women, vaishyas and shudras with those born of sin, the *Geeta* opened for them the door of *moksha* (IX. 32).

This had been barred to them by the *Upanishads*, with exceptions that only proved the rule. But what Yajnavalkya, the great authority of Upanishadic spiritual wisdom, had denied, the *Geeta*, after the body blow delivered by Buddhism to that wisdom, could not deny. The author of the *Geeta* conceded it, if not with grace, at any rate, with "discretion".

The next point is even more significant and interesting. The door of *moksha* may be thrown open to the lower orders and women. But how were they to enter it?

The only path advocated by the *Upanishads* was penance and meditation, pompously called the Jnana Marg. But the ponderous and mystical mumbo-jumbo of *atma* and *brahma* was utterly incomprehensible to the lower orders. That was the monopoly of brahmins and kshatriyas. Besides, these upper orders also needed the back-breaking toil of the vaishyas and shudras for their very existence and comfort. So who was going to allow the lower orders the luxury of retiring into the forests and meditating which was bound to deprive the upper orders of the economic foundation of their ease and comfort?

A way out had to be found. And that was *bhakti*, whose roots went back to later Buddhism, though its fully worked out theory and practice is the contribution of the *Geeta*.

Bhakti meant unconditional surrender to God, with profound feelings of love and devotion. It needed no meditation, no penance, no insight into the occult mysteries of *brahma* and *atma*. A leaf, a flower, a fruit, or plain water, anything offered to God with devout love, did the job (IX. 26). The fifth verse in the twelfth canto unabashedly states that the easy

path of *bhakti* was meant particularly for the ignorant, the rustic.

So the problem was solved. Keep the lower orders and women out of the theological-intellectual preserves which gave the aura of sanctity to the economic and political power of the exploiters, and yet open to them the door of *moksha*. What a marvellous solution! Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds! *Satyam, shivam, sundaram!*

Let us proceed further. The poor and the ignorant cannot worship and pray to an incomprehensible abstraction, an elusive Power that cannot be seen with one's eyes, cannot be touched by hand, cannot be heard by the ears, cannot even be thought of by the brain. (This is not a satirical remark. This is precisely how the *atma* and *brahma* are described in various places in the *Upanishads*. Vide, the famous passage, "Neti, Neti".)

The "multitude" needs a palpable, tangible, human God to worship and to propitiate. And this means a personalised, human God.

For this "contraption" also the way had been cleared by later Buddhism. The Buddha had to pass through many lives before he attained Buddhahood. Then why not the Supreme Power descend on earth occasionally in flesh and blood, in the form of an incarnation, an *avatar*? And that is the solution of the *Bhagavad Geeta*.

It took *Sharanam Gachchami* from *Buddham Sharanam Gachchami* and just installed Shri Krishna in the place of Buddha. The one mandate repeated in the *Geeta ad nauseum* is, "Surrender to Me alone", "Give up all Gods and surrender to Me", "My *bhaktas* will never perish", "I am the universe, I am the smallest particle, I am everything"!

So the "multitude" was given a tangible God who needed nothing more to propitiate than devout love and dedication.

That the main, pre-Buddhist *Upanishads* had no place for any such thing did not matter. Isn't Hinduism "flexible"? Does it not "assimilate" ever new ideas and yet "remain the same"?

There are very appreciative references in the *Geeta* to *ahimsa*, compassion, mercy and so on. Clearly, they come from the Buddhist tradition, not Upanishadic.

In the sphere of philosophy, the *Geeta* is at pains to reconcile Sankhya, Yoga and Vedanta (i.e. Upanishadic idealism). There are sentences such as "*Prakriti* determines what you do" (XVIII. 59). In fact, God Shri Krishna even claims that "Among those that have attained Perfection, I am Kapila Muni" (X. 26). Kapila, as is known, is considered the founder of Sankhya philosophy.

How is this position reconciled with the running Vedantic thread of the *Geeta* that it is the Absolute, Unknowable, Formless, etc. Principle that governs and guides all human actions? Simple. Shri Krishna's position is that every truth is true on its own plane, but the plane of Vedanta being the highest, all other truths are subservient to it. Q.E.D.

So the *Geeta* does not give up, it stands by the basic philosophical tenets of Vedanta. What it attempts is a squaring of the circle, squeezing other philosophical theories (the detestable Lokayata, of course, excepted!) into Vedanta.

Here, mention may be made of an interesting, I might even say creditable (let us give the opponent his due) characteristic of the *Geeta*.

Its language is, at once, poetic, simple and terse. It is even epigrammatic. Those who have known the *Geeta* will never forget its lucid aphorisms which grip the reader. Mighty brains had toiled before the *Geeta*, and mighty brains have sweated after it to explain the theory of the transmigration of the soul. How can the unseeable *atma*, and that after the death of an individual, pass into the body of another person yet unborn? Very simple, says the *Geeta*. "Just as a person casts away tattered clothes and puts on new ones!" (II. 22). This just floors you, doesn't it? And you must be an utter dunce, indeed, if the Divine Light still does not pene'rate your dense head!

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF BHAKTI

The late Prof. Kosambi made a contribution to the understanding of the *Geeta* by bringing out the political role of *bhakti*.

The *Geeta*, as we have explained, belongs to a period (a very long one, no doubt) when tribal kingdoms and republics were

on the way out and territorial kingdoms and empires were taking their place.

Every political power needs an ideological-spiritual basis for commanding the loyalty of its citizens. The ultimate sanction of political power is force, but that alone does not suffice to maintain "law and order". The people have to accept a government voluntarily if it is to function normally. And that demands some commonly accepted concept of loyalty to the state.

In the tribal kingdoms, it was the blood relation between the clans of the tribe that provided the bond of unity and loyalty to the king.

What was to replace it in the territorial kingdoms? It was the concept of the king as the representative of God (in Europe) and as an element of Godhood (in India) that became the new basis of loyalty and obedience to the state power.

This was still further reinforced by the development of feudalism in India about two centuries after the *Geeta* in the Gupta period. We shall come to it later.

But there is not the slightest doubt that *bhakti* towards God in the *Geeta* most certainly strengthened fealty to the king, as an element of God, in Indian feudalism. No wonder it helped the Guptas who even re-edited the Puranas to strengthen the loyalty of their subjects to the throne.

Thus, *bhakti* towards God strengthened *bhakti* towards the king, *bhakti* towards the king strengthened *bhakti* towards God, and both together helped to consolidate the temporal and spiritual power of the governing, property-owning classes over the toiling masses. What a happy solution!

TRIBAL VS TERRITORIAL POWER

That brings us to what is really the central issue, the central theme of the *Bhagvat Geeta*.

The *Geeta* is famous as a dialogue between Shri Krishna and Arjuna. The latter, the most valorous warrior of the five Pandava brothers, refuses to kill his kith and kin, the Kauravas, as they face him, ready for battle, in the epic armageddon of

Bharata.⁵ After great effort, Shri Krishna convinced him that it was his duty to fight, and Arjuna went into action.

What does this discussion really mean? What is it all about?

It is generally believed that it was a difference of opinion on the question of violence and non-violence. Arjuna did not want to kill his brethren while Shri Krishna held that they had to be killed. But this is an oversimplification.

The *Geeta* is not a dialogue on the question of violence and non-violence in general, in the abstract. Shri Krishna himself pays tribute to the noble principle of *ahimsa* in three or four places in the *Geeta*.

The dialogue is on a specific question of violence vs non-violence, and that issue had great historical significance.

In the very opening canto of the *Geeta*, where Arjuna just puts down his bow and arrows, and refuses to fight, the question he raises is this. "I see before me my brothers, cousins, uncles, preceptors, all my relatives. To kill them means the destruction of the Kula (clan, tribe). Such destruction means the end of the ancient Kula Dharma. Those who commit that crime go to hell" (I. 39, 40, 44).

This was a clear, historical question. War and violence were there in tribal societies. But that took place between different tribes, not connected with one another by blood. Violence against a member of one's own tribe, i.e. within the periphery of blood relations, was unknown to tribal societies. It was just not done. Such violence violated the sacred principle of *kula dharma* and was impermissible, no matter for what reason. In fact, tribal customs and traditions (laws) made it obligatory for every member of a tribe to protect and defend every other member in the event of danger. One for all, all for each, that was the very bedrock of tribal life and society.

No wonder, Arjuna was simply flabbergasted at the very idea

5. The gigantic battle full of miracles described in the *Mahabharata*, never took place. But historians are now agreed that the battle of Bharata, fought on Kuru Kshetra, did take place somewhere in the ninth or tenth century B.C. and that it had a significant role in Indian history. Experts are now engaged in separating fact from fiction in India's greatest epic, the *Mahabharata*.

of committing such a heinous sin and just laid down his arms, refusing to go into action.

We have shown earlier that the issue of tribal versus territorial power dogged Indian history for centuries. By the time of the Guptas, it was finally settled in favour of the territorial principle. Samudra Gupta, the "Napoleon" of India, is famous for having destroyed a very large number of tribal kingdoms in Punjab and Rajputana, where tribalism lingered on very much longer than in the Gangetic valley.

Shri Krishna, in the *Geeta*, is the champion of the territorial principle, as against Arjuna, still devoted to tribal unity and loyalty. Ultimately, Shri Krishna wins, Arjuna loses, that is the significance of the epic dialogue.

Why the author of the *Geeta*, written about a thousand years after the battle of Kuru Kshetra, should have chosen that episode to interpolate a hypothetical dialogue into the *Mahabharata* is not difficult to explain.

Principles and theories associated with the hoary, sacrosanct past exercise great influence on the minds of the people, even today, in the age of science and rationalism. Obviously, that was far more so two thousand years ago, when the *Geeta* was written. The theory it needed for contemporary politics had to be made sacrosanct and thus authoritative by associating it with the hoary past. That also explains the *vishva roopa darshana* and other miracles shoved into the *Geeta*.

THE STHITAPRAJNA OF THE GEETA

Many rationally-minded people who do not accept the hocus-focus of the *Geeta* are still tremendously impressed by its characterisation of the *sthitaprajna* (II. 54 to 72). They see in him the ideal that every noble-minded person should strive to reach.

The *sthitaprajna* of the *Geeta*, no doubt, appears an ideal personality. His description includes innumerable qualities which a brave person, totally devoted to the cause of the people, has to possess. He is fearless, unruffled and self-controlled under all circumstances, utterly unselfish, conscientious in his duties towards society, etc. etc.

But a philosophical question, with very serious practical implications, cannot be bypassed when we consider the character of the *sthitaprajna*.

Every single description of the *sthitaprajna* in the *Geeta* clearly presents him as an extremely self-centred, egoistical personality. His peace of mind, his detachment from all attachments (*anaasakti*), all arise, not from his identity with the people, but with the Supreme Brahma. No one who knows the *Upanishads* and the *Geeta* can deny that the *sthitaprajna* is no one else than the person in the *Upanishads* who reaches the stage of considering himself as *brahma*. The idea behind *aham brahmaasmi* (I am Brahma) is identical with the concept of the *sthitaprajna*.

The *sthitaprajna* reaches a state of Bliss by concentrating on his own self (II. 55). He withdraws his sense perceptions within himself just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs within its own body (II. 58). So on and so on, the *Geeta* proceeds with his description. And, as though all this would still be insufficient, we have the famous verse (II. 69) which says, "What is night for all creatures is wakefulness for him. What is wakefulness for the creatures is night for him." So, what is light for you and me is darkness for the *sthitaprajna*, what is darkness for us is light for him. The implication is clear. The masses are sunk in ignorance, greed, voluptuousness, temptation, violence, and what not. The one who has seen Light is untouched by all human weaknesses.

If this is not spiritual ego, what else is it? Deep down in his heart the *sthitaprajna* looks down upon the people, he has a profound spiritual contempt for them.

Pity and benevolence have nothing in common with the sense of being identified with the people. To be "for" the people is not the same as being "of" the people. And, besides, the question of questions is always there. It must always crop up like King Charles' head. The *sthitaprajna* is "for" the people strictly within the straightjacket of *chaturvarnya*!

The ideal leader of the people is never a benevolent dictator. He is a revolutionary democrat.

FROM THE GEETA TO SHANKARA

This means, roughly, from 200 A.D. to 900 A.D. Though the "classical" Gupta empire lasted for less than two hundred years (about 300 to 500 A.D.) in this period, it should be characterised as the Gupta age, for, it was the Guptas who initiated its most characteristic feature, feudalism.

The self-sufficient village economy of India, with its iron-clad, caste-based, social division of labour, dates from a much earlier period. But it is with the emergence of the *samantas*, who come on the scene under the Guptas, that a feudal, political system began to take shape in the country.

This was inevitable. As pointed out earlier, under extant conditions of transport and communications, and of technology in general, the big kingdoms and vast empires of the period could not be stabilised by centralised administrative methods. The devolution of political and administrative authority, *de facto* and/or *de jure*, by the king or emperor to his feudatories, on condition that they owed fealty to him, was the only manner in which such governments could be run. This was a retreat from Magadha statecraft, but it was unavoidable.

Trade and cities also declined after about 500 A.D. There was a considerable ruralisation of society as also of the governing classes.

The really tragic consequence (though there, too, the question "What else could happen", cannot be answered) was that feudalism also brought in its wake, all-round stagnation.

The Gupta empire is rightly considered the most dazzling empire of ancient India, or, more correctly speaking, the empire on the threshold between ancient and medieval India. In pomp, splendour, and the opulence of the governing classes (though not in power), it certainly surpassed the empire of Ashoka.

At the same time, the brahmin priesthood was given, and acquired, a religious, social, economic, and even political authority under the Guptas that it had never enjoyed before. Land gifts to brahmins and temples swelled like a snowball. And, under feudalism, land not only means economic power but social influence and administrative authority.

The rising feudatories and brahmins were, by no means, mo-

dels of the spirit of quest, adventure, discovery and advance in various spheres of social activity. They were, as all over the world, the very reverse. They stood for social conservatism, suffocating ritualism, subservience to authority, ignorant parochialism, the strangulation of science, and everything retrogressive and oppressive in life. Exclusiveness between caste and caste, based on religious injunctions regarding purity and pollution reached the limit. In a word, the all-round ossification of Indian society begins as the country reached the pinnacle of its glory.

Gone were the days of Magadha, Milinda (Menander) and Kanishka when Indians braved the stormy seas to reach Cambodia and South China; when they crossed awesome mountains and waterless deserts to reach Tibet, Sinkiang and Baku; when Taksha Shila was an emporium of international trade, science, and philosophy; when Indian materialist philosophers and scientists dispensed with God both as Creator and Governor of the universe; in a word, when Indians believed in the exchange of material and spiritual values, in giving and taking, in teaching others and learning from others.

Foreign travel itself was now damned as sinful for which atonement was obligatory on returning home. It was from the Gupta period onwards that great pressure was exercised by the brahmin priesthood on our scientists (doctors and astronomers) and materialist philosophers to compromise their rational, atheistic positions, or theistic interpolations were brazenly smuggled into their compendia.

A typical expression of this period was, *Na vadet yaavanim bhaashaam*, meaning, one should not speak the language of the Greeks. From the Indo-Greek period onwards the upper circles of Indians and the Indo-Greeks had become conversant with each other's language, which naturally made a tremendous contribution to scientific and intellectual advance. This was now frowned upon. Simultaneously, Sanskrit, the language of the elite, the rulers and of priestly obscurantism, developed an importance in the Gupta age unknown to the Magadha period. Buddha and Ashoka spoke and patronised the languages of the people, right from Kalinga to Gandhara. The edicts on Ashoka's pillars are in local languages, not in Sanskrit.

The Rig Vedic and Upanishadic Rishis, with all their callous heartlessness towards the shudras, were a go-ahead people, out to conquer nature, increase production and organise society. The same spirit continued during the Magadha—Indo-Greek-Kushana period. It was during the Gupta period and onwards that the governing classes became utterly parasitical, the masses sank into stupor, progress was choked and society became a stagnant pool.

Social intercourse is the prime requisite of social and intellectual advance. When a society fragments itself into a thousand divisions with the doors of intercourse barred and bolted between caste and caste, and between all of them and the wide world outside, it invites its own decay and doom.

We get a vivid glimpse of this India in Al Biruni's memoirs. "I am pure, you are impure", "you must not touch me, I will not even drink water touched by you", "I will not teach you anything, I will learn nothing from you", "Knowledge based on the test of reason and practice must surrender to ignorance based on blind faith", "I will stew in my own juice and yet insist that my esoteric wisdom is the highest in the world"—there, you have post-Gupta India for you!

A "touch me not" society ends up by becoming a mummified society.

I am putting the issue very sharply, because, otherwise, in my opinion, we just cannot understand Shankara.

In the sphere of philosophy, he carried the idealism of Vedanta to its logical absurdity. And this interpretation he got, *prachhanna* (concealed) Bouddha that he was, from the later, decadent Buddhist Vijñānavādins and Shūnyavādins. Neither the *Upanishads* nor the *Geeta* subscribed to the view that the sense-perceived world just did not exist; that it was pure illusion; that creation was a myth, since the tangible world was a myth; that all change and mutation were unadulterated nonsense. The *Upanishads* and the *Geeta* were not Advaita-Vedantins. That was Shankara's "unique" contribution to the "development" of Vedanta. Naturally enough, Shankara was furiously opposed to logic based on practical experience, which he openly ridiculed.

Proceeding further, Shankara carried the *jñāna marg* of Vedanta also to its logical conclusion. His *sanyasa* (renunciation)

amounted to a complete escape from life. Very naturally, too, since, for him, life itself was pure illusion. If Shankara, and not Shri Krishna, had been the mentor of Arjuna, he would have advised Arjuna simply to run away from battle, not because it would have been wrong to kill one's kith and kin, but because the battle itself was totally unreal. Lokmanya Tilak criticised Shankara on this very ground, because, as Tilak correctly pointed out, *karma yoga* and Advaita Vedanta could not be reconciled.

The point I want to stress is that Shankara's Advaita Vedanta is not only ontologically indefensible. All idealism is ontologically indefensible. The characteristic feature of Shankara's interpretation of Vedanta was that he gave it an extremely nihilistic and pessimistic twist. Why?

The explanation is to be found in the contemporary state of Indian society. It was a society that had become so stagnant, introvert and divided against itself that it lost all confidence in its present and all optimism about its future. It is this society that is mirrored, on the philosophical plane, in Advaita Vedanta.

HUMANIST AND PATRIOTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GEETA

Now we have to come to the greatest contradiction in the interpretation of the *Geeta*. How is it that a treatise, so palpably anti-people in content, could be used for humanist, progressive causes in later centuries?

The answer to this question needs going deeper into the problem of idealism itself.

Vedanta is avowedly an idealist philosophy. The inherent outlook of idealism is the denial of material reality, sense perceived reality. I am saying outlook, because not all idealists totally deny the existence of material reality, as was done by Shankara or Berkeley. Most attribute to matter a derivative, secondary existence. All the same, even such idealists take the position that ultimate reality is a pure idea, pure consciousness, and that it is unknowable through sense perception, including man's brain. There are those who hold that it is hypothetically unknowable, others, like the Vedantists, who hold that through some supernatural intuition, man merges into ultimate

reality, and thereby understands it, or, as they put it, "realises" it. In any case, it is beyond human comprehension based on human faculties.

Denying material reality and, at the same time somehow recognising it, is the basic contradiction of idealism, Vedanta not excepted, which leads it to all sorts of contradictory positions. In practical life, it means that various, and even contradictory conclusions, can be drawn from it.

For instance, the one drawn by Shankara was that since the world was totally unreal, one's purpose in life had to be a total withdrawal (*nivritti*) from the deceptive (*bhraamak*), illusory (*maayaatmak*) world of sense perception. To put it in Shankara's own words, who, despite all his philosophical illusionism, was a brilliant campaigner as well, "Who is your wife? Who, your son? Whence do you come? Whither are you going? This Sansaar is extremely strange. Give up all illusions about it and surrender to the infinite."

A second, and very different, conclusion was drawn by the renowned Bhakti cult saint poets from the twelfth century onwards. "True", they said, "that ultimate reality is mystical, formless, propertyless, etc. But, after all, the sense perceived world and Chaturvarnya are the creation of the Supreme Being. From the Brahmin to the Chandala, everybody's Atma is the same. If the brahmin can realise ultimate reality through Jnana, so can women, vaishyas and shudras, through Bhakti. All are the children of God, and hence, basically the same. Finally, all meet in moksha. So, granting Chaturvarnya, why should women and the lower orders be subjected to the atrocious treatment meted out to them by the orthodox, bigoted and vain Brahmin priesthood? We must give them a humane treatment, human treatment." Many of the saint poets, in fact, went further in their denunciation of the priests. They called them conceited ignoramuses, hypocrites and tyrants. And they embraced the untouchables also within the Bhakti fold.

And, this is not a question only of interpretation. In actual life, it brought about a sharp conflict. The priesthood not only cursed the saint-poets, it persecuted, ostracised and anathematized the Bhakti saints.

So, idealism in general, and Vedanta, as it developed, in

India, could be yoked to humanism and hence to progressive causes. There is no need, and no question of denying it.

It needs to be stated further that this was also due to feudal conditions. Firstly, religion provided the overall ideology of feudal society, and hence, protestant movements also took on a religious form. Secondly, and I think, that is also very important, feudal society is the most static, the most vegetative, of all human societies.

Feudal society is dominantly agrarian. The land owning classes living parasitically on rent and forced labour extorted from the actual cultivator, are interested only in maximising such extortion. The cultivator, on the other hand, has no interest in increasing production since he knows that beyond his bare needs of subsistence he is bound to be deprived of everything he produces. Therein lies the root of feudal stagnation.

I am mentioning this point, because, sometimes, the question is asked as to why the socio-ideological viewpoint of the Bhakti cult was not as advanced as that of Buddha. There is no denying that early Buddhism was far more advanced and radical, all along the line, than the Bhakti movement. The reason, according to me, is that neither Upanishadic society, nor society in the Magadha period, was the static, hidebound society of the post-Gupta period. This is not to underplay the cruelty, exploitation and oppression of the earlier periods. What I want to say is that the earlier societies were fluid, whereas feudalism was not. They were definitely more dynamic than the post-Gupta society.⁶

Now to come to our nineteenth century revivalist (Hindu) patriotic school. Why did our patriotic leaders hark back to the *Geeta*?

Before Indians could as much as understand what was happening, Great Britain subjugated India within half a century of the battle of Plassey. Sheer despondency, loss of self-confidence, even an inferiority complex enveloped the whole country.

6. I must state here that, as yet, I have not been able properly to study India between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries. So my judgement should be considered as applicable to the period, roughly, up to 1000 A.D.

The first thing that the rising patriotic leadership had to do was to regenerate self-respect and self-confidence among the people. The consciousness that "We have the strength to regain what we have lost" had to be created.

The ideological weapon they caught hold of was that our ancient "spiritual" civilization was superior to the "materialist" west. The *atma* was stronger than all material force and was bound to win in the end.

In fact, more. It was the clear position of the *Geeta* that the body was perishable and hence transient, while the *atma* was imperishable, eternal, immortal. "Hence", said our leaders to the people, "Why are you afraid of physical pain, torture and death? Why are you afraid of British batons, bullets and prisons? Your body may suffer but your imperishable Atma will live for ever."

No wonder Khudiram Bose embraced the gallows, inspired by the death-defying lines of the *Geeta* on his lips, "Weapons cannot pierce Him, fire cannot burn Him, nothing can destroy Him" (II. 23).

At the same time, the cloven hoof of Vedanta was revealed even in the nineteenth century. For, tragicomically, the British rulers also "upheld" the *Geeta* and Vedanta to "prove" that Indians were unfit for Swaraj. And can it be denied that Shankara's interpretation of Vedantic idealism gave the hated foreign rulers a handle to "prove their case?"

Let us proceed further. As the Hindu patriots harked back to the *Geeta*, no doubt for patriotic purposes, Muslim patriots naturally harked back to the *Quran* for the same purpose. And it cannot be denied, at least now, that despite and irrespective of the laudable purpose of both, they did bring grist to the British policy of divide and rule. Between progressive revivalism and communalism the dividing line is thin, and what is worse, very slippery. Such was the tragic end of harnessing the *Geeta* and the *Quran* to the cause of the struggle for freedom.

Marxism does not deny, has never denied, that idealist philosophy can and does serve progressive causes. Marxism is dialectical and historical materialism, not mechanical materialism. What it insists upon is that we have to understand the

limitations and the negative aspects of such a utilisation of idealism. A philosophy which rejects the fundamental reality of matter, of nature; which rejects sense perception and hence practice as the instruments of valid knowledge, such a philosophy necessarily leads to mysticism, agnosticism, deism, superstition and all sorts of obscurantism. No wonder, in the long ages of human history, idealism has been, *dominantly*, a weapon of the exploiters against the exploited, of the oppressors against the oppressed, of ignorance and darkness against science, knowledge and human progress.

With all respect to the great Shri Krishna, it is not the introvert *sthitaprajna* who concentrates his thoughts on himself, who withdraws his sense perceptions within himself like the tortoise withdrawing its limbs within itself, that attains Light and Real Knowledge. It is the "ignorant", benighted masses who shape the destiny of humanity by their sweat and toil, who struggle with Godforsaken matter every moment of their life, it is they that reach the heights of light, true knowledge and freedom (and no capital letters, please!). It is the *Geeta*, not we, that turns things upside down. It is the *Geeta*, not we, that turns darkness into light, and light into darkness.

THE FUTURE

How about the future? And, by the future, I mean the struggle for socialism which is now accepted by all our progressive and democratic forces as India's goal in the days ahead.

I know people, many of them quite sincere, who suggest that the appeal of the *Geeta* should be utilised for our advance towards socialism. The argument is generally based on "the traditions and psychology of the Indian people".

However alluring and tempting this suggestion may be, one has to be clear that the *Geeta* cannot provide the basis for the necessary advance.

Woolly sentimentalism and misguided patriotic pride are poor guides on the issue.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AND INVIOABLE FRAMEWORK OF THE GEETA IS CHATURVARNYA AND VEDANTA. CHATURVARNYA MEANS BUILT IN, ENDOGAMOUS INEQUALITY BY BIRTH. AND VEDANTA MEANS MYSTICISM.

NOT ONE OF THE INNUMERABLE AND DIVERSE INTERPRETATIONS PUT ON THE GEETA THROUGH THE CENTURIES TRANSGRESSES THIS BASIC FRAMEWORK OF THE GEETA.

Even the humanist Bhakti cult and our patriots, right up to Mahatma Gandhi, never rejected this framework. In fact, they swore by it. What they rejected was the utterly reactionary interpretation of the bigoted Sanatanists, and the anti-national interpretation of the British rulers.

One has to be absolutely clear on this point when thinking of the future. The theory of Vedanta, and even of *chaturvarnya*, can be stretched like rubber. But like rubber, not beyond a point. Beyond that point, it snaps. Beyond that point, it has to be rejected, if we want to advance further.

The struggle for socialism is inconceivable without rousing the class consciousness and forging the class unity of the toiling masses.

And class cuts through caste, just as caste cuts through class. One or the other. The two cannot become bed-fellows.

Similarly, a rational, scientific understanding of all the processes of nature and human society is indispensable, both for the theory and the practice of the struggle for socialism. Vedanta means mysticism. Mysticism and science can no more go together than class and caste.

In this context, it cannot be forgotten for a moment that crores upon crores of the toiling Muslims, Harijans and Adivasis have to be brought into the struggle for socialism if it is to succeed in India. It is ridiculous to hope that they can be inspired by any interpretation of the *Geeta*, no matter how we may stretch the rubber.

That is why a consistent struggle against Vedantic idealism and *chaturvarnya*, the caste system, is indispensable if we are to progress in the direction of socialism.

Far from avoiding it, or going in for patched up compromises, we have to take it up with zest and persistence.

Further, the problem has a direct link with present-day politics, because of which, such a struggle becomes even more urgent and important.

Never before have foreign and internal reactionary forces in India made the *Geeta* as powerful a weapon for attacking all

progressive, rational and secular forces in the country as during the last decade and more. One has only to glance through the "Today's Engagements" column of our daily press—English as well as all Indian languages—to realise the massive scale on which Vedantic mysticism is being used for anti-national, retrogressive, reactionary, obscurantist purposes.

This is being done by various institutions—from the most vulgar to the most respectable—but the end result is the same. What the Rajneeshes and Bala Yogis do in a crude and repugnant manner, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan does in a scholarly, sombre fashion. And the CIA does the back-seat driving for both.

The younger generation, educated as well as the rest, is being enmeshed in this net of superstition and obscurantism on a scale we would never have believed only twenty years ago.

Still further down the drain, the ideologues of Hindu communalism also pick up the same weapon. Balraj Madhok's *Indianisation, Why, What and How?* and Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts* are sinister and poisonous weapons which exploit the *Geeta*, Vedantic idealism, "our ancient, spiritual civilisation" and what not for attacking the Muslims and Harijans, Nehruism, Marxism, and anything and everything that is at all progressive, rational, forward-looking and human.

The Indian bourgeoisie needed the *Geeta* before independence as an ideological weapon in the struggle against imperialism. After independence, and much more so with the deepening crisis of capitalism, with the rising tide of mass discontent, they need it as a weapon against progress, democracy and socialism.

The progressive, democratic, secular forces in the country, and, above all, the Lefts, will, therefore, make a grave mistake if they ignore the problem of the *Geeta* as academic or "religious". It has become a political problem of grave importance, and hence, has to be faced for political, no less than ideological reasons.

In the end, to remove all possible misunderstanding or misinterpretation, it may be clarified that it is not the position of Marxism that masses of people having faith in the *Geeta* or

Vedanta will not participate in the struggle for socialism. Of course, they will. No one "becomes a Marxist" before joining the struggle for socialism. It is mainly through economic and political struggles that the masses understand the relation between economics, politics, philosophy and religion. From Vedanta to Marxism is a long, arduous journey, and, to be frank, a painful journey. It is not easy to break through the ideological-cultural cocoon in which one has been nurtured since one's childhood. So, shoulder to shoulder, we fight with all such people. We fight because we have a common enemy and a common goal. The point is that the *Geeta* and Vedantic idealism cannot become the ideological basis of the struggle for socialism. And the masses have to be constantly educated on that point. Dialectical and historical materialism, Marxism-Leninism, alone can be the ideological and political guides of the struggle for socialism.

BHAGAVAD-GITA AND OUR NATIONAL MOVEMENT

BHAGAVAD-GITA or the Song of God is taken to be the exhortation delivered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The latter had refused to fight his own kith and kin assembled in battle formation on the opposite side and *Gita* in its eighteen chapters (or *adhayas*) is the lecture given by Krishna whereby Arjuna was ultimately convinced and fought valiantly to win the war, as depicted in the great epic *Mahabharata*.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the savant-philosopher—more known to us as India's most reputed interpreter of Hinduism and the Hindu way of life than the President of the Republic of India—says in a long-introductory essay to his translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* into English that it “is more a religious classic than a philosophic treatise.” Further, “the teaching of the *Gita* is not presented as a metaphysical system thought out by an individual thinker or school of thinkers. It is set forth as a tradition which has emerged from the religious life of mankind... It represents not any sect of Hinduism but Hinduism as a whole...” (S. Radhakrishnan, *Bhagavad Gita*, George Allen & Unwin, India, p 12).

Aldous Huxley, introducing *Gita* to the Western audience in an English translation jointly done by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (published by the New American Library) says: “The Bhagavad-Gita occupies an intermediate position between scripture and theology; for it combines the

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poetical qualities of the first with the clear-cut methodicalness of the second... it can be regarded as the focus of all Indian religion... is also one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the Perennial Philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring value, not only for Indians, but for all mankind."

In its original setting *Gita* is placed as eighteen chapters (Chapters XXIII to XL) of the Bhishma-parvan of *Mahabharata*. We do not know the name of the author and opinions also sharply differ as to when *Bhagavad-Gita* was first composed. According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, "the Bhagavad Gita is later than the great movement represented by the early Upanishads and earlier than the period of the development of the philosophic systems and their formulations in *sutras*. From its archaic constructions and internal references, we may infer that it is definitely a work of the pre-Christian era. Its date may be assigned to the fifth century B.C. though the text may have received many alterations in subsequent times." (*Ibid*, p 14).

Dr. D. D. Kosambi, the eminent scholar, scientist and Marxist writer on some aspects of our ancient history, on the other hand, in his *Myth and Reality* puts the period of its composition as sixth century A.D. on the basis of the fact that *Gita* bases itself on the concept of *Bhakti*, that is, personal devotion and surrender of one's self. The concept of *Bhakti*, according to Kosambi, is a reflection of the feudal order of society demanding "the chain of personal royalty which binds retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king or emperor. Not loyalty in the abstract but with a secure foundation in the means and relations of production: land ownership, military service, tax-collection and the conversion of local produce into commodities through the magnates. This system was certainly not possible before the end of the 6th century A.D. The key word is *samanta* which till 532 at least meant 'neighbouring ruler' and by 592 A.D. had come to mean feudal baron. The new barons were personally responsible to the king, and part of a tax-gathering mechanism." (D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962, p 31).

We need not dwell too much on these facts as our endeavour here will be confined mainly to trace the influence of

Bhagavad-Gita on our national movement and struggle for freedom from alien British rule, and to make an assessment also of its effects today after independence. Its religious-cum-spiritual aspect and various interpretations must be of relevance to us to the extent that it helped to mould the thinking of some of our national leaders.

Judged in this context, it was the novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya who was the first thinker of the modern period in the nineteenth century to interpret *Gita* and seek direct political inspiration from it. He was followed in due course by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, the sage of Pondicherry but previously accused in the Maniktolla Bomb case of 1908, Bal Gangadhar Tilak who wrote his *Gita-Rahasya* in pencil during his incarceration in Mandalay jail from 1908 onwards; and Mahatma Gandhi who also made his own interpretation of *Gita* in course of a series of lectures to his Ashram inmates. And it is with *Gita* in their hands that our early martyrs, Khudiram at the beginning of this century mounted the gallows. There is no denying therefore its very great influence on our national movement.

It may as well be pointed out at the very outset that a little too much stress on ancient and medieval Hindu scriptures, religious symbols, imagery and inspiration from them helped to a certain extent to alienate other non-Hindu sections of the population from the nationalist movement. This is particularly and predominantly true of the Muslim section of the population.

We may recall in this connection the long controversy in the twenties and thirties of adopting 'Bande Mataram' (vow to the Motherland) as a slogan. To the people of Islamic faith, the entire imagery of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya in introducing *Bande-Mataram* through the pages of his novel *Ananda Math* and its Bhowani-Mandir (temple of Bhowani, an incarnation of the goddess Kali) was unacceptable, almost sacrilegious and certainly ran counter to their faith.

What is equally interesting to note is that the Muslims found their inspiration from the teachings of Koran, Hadis and other scriptures to fight against the alien British rule. This is a separate subject by itself and outside our scope here.

We must record that in the twenties, two national revolutionaries, Ram Prasad Bismil and Asfaqullah, mounted the gallows on the same day with a copy of Gita and Koran respectively in their hands.

It is sometimes held that Indian nationalism found its strength and even expression because the then educated elite society of India was taught by the British rulers to read the advanced democratic bourgeois thoughts of the nineteenth century. This is untenable. The point is that as India was awakening to a sense of nationhood to which the advanced bourgeois thoughts of the nineteenth century did make their contribution, it had to assert its national prestige; it was a search for national identity. And in that struggle for national self-expression it was often the case that the early Indian nationalists had to fling it before their foreign rulers who denied them a national status that they represented a superior and much more ancient tradition of civilisation. It was not unusual therefore to come across startling statements of a stark revivalist nature from men of such giant intellectual stature like a Lokmanya Tilak or a Mahatma Gandhi who often had no hesitation in ascribing anything 'foreign' as un-Hindu or against true nationalism.

The Indian educated middle class therefore in their quest of freedom and self-expression which was denied to them by the British colonial order would, had they been "educated only in the Sanskrit Vedas, in monastic seclusion from every other current of thought...have assuredly found in the Sanskrit Vedas the inspiring principles and slogans of their struggle." (R. Plame Dutt, *India Today*, Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta, 1970 edition, p. 303).

It is long overdue therefore that an attempt be made to interpret *Bhagavad-Gita* from a Marxist standpoint bearing in mind its immense role in our national movement, as also its tremendous patronage now by India's foremost monopolist house, the Birlas who spend millions of rupees throughout the year to organise *Gita-yagnas* and the like.

We can just as well put across our main contention here which is: *Gita* which provided one of the main ideological

bases of our national movement in its early phase, when the class question and class struggle had not yet appeared or become a major factor in the Indian arena of the national struggle for freedom, becomes a weapon in the hands of reaction and is patronised by the Indian monopoly houses today precisely for its teaching of class stability and class oppression. This is developed throughout *Gita* in its conception of *Swadharma*, its preaching of *niskama karma* and the theory of indestructibility of soul, the transmigration of soul through a succession of births and its call to set up a *dharma-raj* by destroying all that is *adharma* and for which an *avatar* will appear as the situation demands. All these acted as a double-edged weapon. But to develop this point, we have to go through even if in a short compass some of its actual teachings and particularly the commentaries on them by our patriotic nationalist leaders.

THE COMMENTARY of *Sankara* (788 A.D.-820 A.D.) is the most ancient of the existing ones. To him Reality or *Brahman* is one without a second. The entire manifest world, unless realised as the expression of the Supreme Being, reduces itself to *maya* and is the product of *avidya*. To be liberated from it is the work of *jnana*, which when realised in its fulness, is also the negation of *karma*. Sankara holds that while *karma* is essential as a means for the purification of the mind, when *jnana* is attained, *karma* ceases. He rejects the view of *jnana-karma-samuccaya*, that is, a synthesis of the two.

To the nationalist thinkers seeking India's liberation from foreign rule and in their assertion of a national identity which was sought to be denied by oppressive colonial rule—this was particularly Bankim Chandra's problem when the question of political liberation was yet to appear as a realisable objective—Sankara's *Jnana-bad* was found to be too negative and leading to passivity. This was somewhat dodged by dividing *jnana* into two aspects: *sawtya* and *tamas*, and since the predilection was likely to be a *tamasic* interpretation of *jnana*, Bankim Chandra, Swami Vivekananda and Tilak insisted on the *karma-yoga*, that is, the *rajasik* aspect.

Thus Bankim Chandra with his insistence on *Anushilan* that is, cultivation of the body and mind (note, both of body and mind, not that of mind only) through *karma* actually helped to provide the very name, "Anushilan Samity" to the first group of Indian revolutionaries, some of whom faced the gallows, others untold suffering and incarceration in jails and in the Andamans, including Barin Ghose, Ullaskar Dutt and others.

Another batch of Indian revolutionaries who also believed in armed actions against the British rule—all of these usually called the 'terrorists', a derogatory term coined by the British

rulers and therefore unacceptable to us—was directly inspired by Tilak who writing his *Gita-Rahashya* in Mandalay jail gives its full title as *Gita-Rahashya* or *Karma-Yoga Sastra*. It was translated into Bengali directly from Marathi by Jyotirindranath Tagore, poet Rabindranath's elder brother in 1925 and now reprinted again in 1970. There is no doubt that with all its euphemistic and sometimes aesopian language, Tilak's *Gita-Rahashya* in its main appeal is an exhortation to *karma*, and *niskama karma* at that, done by a *sthita-pragya* that is, by somebody who is unaffected by the ups and downs of life, but a *karma* directed towards the liberation of the motherland. We can recall in this connection Tilak's famous statement in court in defence of his fiery articles in *Kesari* for which he was being prosecuted and sent to jail for six years in Burma: "Swaraj is my birthright and I mean to have it!"

Swami Vivekananda, the saint-philosopher, who died in 1902, preached very directly what he called *rajasik dharma*, that is, to cultivate the strength of body without which one cannot acquire strength of mind. He interpreted *Gita* as a source of strength. This is how he spoke at San Francisco on May 29, 1900:

There is only one sin. That is weakness. When I was a boy I read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The only good man I had any respect for was Satan. The only saint is that soul that never weakens, that faces every thing, and determines to die game... Stand up and die game... All weakness, all bondage is imagination. Speak one word to it, it must vanish. Do not weaken: There is no other way out... Stand up and be strong: No fear. No superstition. Face the truth as it is. If death comes—that is the worst of our miseries—let it come: We are determined to die game. That is all the religion I know... (*Thoughts on Gita*, published by Advaita Ashrama, 1978, pp 73-74).

Sri Aurobindo in his *Essays on Gita*, with all his emphasis on Yoga, also reverts back to *karma*. Instead of going into all the intricacies of Sri Aurobindo's mystical language certainly not meant for the common man, it will be easier and better to quote Dilip Kumar Roy, Aurobindo's foremost disciple. Dilip Kumar Roy in his introduction to his beautifully poetic trans-

lation of *Gita* (published by Hind Pocket Book, 1977, poses the question by quoting *Gita's* Chapter IV, Sloka 37 which is: "As the fire which is kindled turns its fuel to ashes, O Arjuna, even so does the fire of wisdom (that is, *jnana*) turn to ashes all work (*karma*)", and then comments:

But this is not the correct way to interpret the *Gita's* teaching nor the best way to profit by its serene harmonious wisdom as has been pointed out by Sri Aurobindo in his masterly *Essays on Gita* in which he has hailed *Gita's* gospel as essentially a synthesis, that is a triune path reconciling with marvellous profundity the three approaches of *jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma* . . . (p 30).

Bhakti to him is utter devotion in doing *karma* without questioning or awaiting results, that is, *niskama karma* through which therefore *jnana* is attained, which *jnana* is not *tamasic*, that is, not leading to passivity but *sawtyic*, that is, a kind of supreme realisation and knowledge. We are here not really concerned with the philosophic connotation and many interpretations of *sawtya*, *rajas* and *tama gunas* except to note that through this differentiation of two kinds of *jnana*, the essential emphasis is on the *karma* aspect of it. In other words, it is through *karma* that you attain *jnana*.

BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAYA had produced two booklets *Dharma-tautya* and *Srimat-Bhagavadgita* in which he first developed the concept of *Anushilan*, that is, cultivation of body and mind.

In *Dharma-tautya* which is in the form of a dialogue between the *guru* and the *sisya* (pupil), questions are posed in the form of four consecutive chapter headings, namely, 'What is *dukha*?', 'What is *sukha*?', 'What is *dharma*?' and 'What is *manushwautya*?'—and the answer is provided by the fifth which is *Anushilan*. The argumentation is in a way quite simple and certainly very logical though we have also to note its inherent contradictions.

Dukha (sorrow) and *sukha* (happiness) are due to violations or otherwise of the natural *brittwi*. Bankim has translated the word *brittwi* as "faculty" but seems to be not very happy about it. In our opinion the main connotation of this *brittwi* is developed further by Bankim Chandra as 'vocation' or capacity to carry out one's vocation ordained by his own station in life. And herein lies the root of social conservatism. *Gita* accepts this, when in defining what is *karma* it is laid down in *Gita* that it is the fulfilment of one's own *swadharma* which is the basis of *karma*.

This *swadharma* is not 'religion' in the accepted sense of the term. This *swadharma* is *anushilan* (or cultivation) of the faculty or vocation (that is, *brittwi*), determined to a person both by his birth and station in life.

This is how Bankim Chandra defines it and we shall give it here in almost literal translation:

The aim of this part of *Gita* is to prove the essential need for cultivating *swadharma*. If we say *swadharma*, the educated community (in Bankim's time it was no doubt the English-knowing section of the population only—DB)

may find it difficult to grasp its meaning. Hence if we use the word (that is, *swadharma*—DB) in its English equivalent as 'Duty' (and Bankim puts it in English alphabet as such—DB), there should be no further problem. The aim of Gita of this part is: to prove the essential need for implementing that Duty. Every man does not have the same kind of *swadharma*—to some it is punishing others, to others *swadharma* is to pardon (others). It is the duty of the soldier to wound the enemy, the *swadharma* of the doctor is to treat the wounded. Man has manifold jobs to do, and his *swadharma* correspond to that. But of all the *swadharmanas*, to wage war is the most heinous of all. If one can avoid war, it is not the task (*kartabya*) of anyone to do it. But a situation arises when his heinous act becomes inevitable and essential. A Timur Lang or a Nadir Shah is coming to burn and loot your country. Under such circumstances anyone who knows how to fight, to him waging war becomes inevitable and essential *swadharma*. (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, *Works*, Vol. I, "Srimad-Bhagavadgita", p 717).

Is it not evident that "if one can avoid war, it is not the *kartabya* of anyone to do it"? But then Bankim Chandra exhorts a person to wage what may be called a *dharma-yuddha* or a just war. If one reads for Timur Lang or Nadir Shah the British colonial rulers, the true meaning of Bankim Chandra's exhortation becomes clear. And he is quite unambiguous about it when in that dialogue between *guru* and the *sisya* (pupil) in the last concluding portion after the pupil has recounted what he has learnt, the *guru* finally adds the stricture: "Do not forget that on top of all *aharma* is love of one's country." (*Ibid*, p 671).

We have already said that this conception of *swadharma* is the very root of social conservatism. This is further strengthened by the following sloka (IV, 13): *Chaturvarnyam maya srstam gunakarmavibhagasah*... (The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work—Radhakrishnan's translation.)

And the very next two lines after the above is even more explicit: *tasya kartaram api mam viddhy akartaram avyayam*

(Though I am its creator, know Me to be incapable of action or change).

Therefore while Lord Krishna takes the entire responsibility on himself of having created these four *varnas* as the rigid division of labour according to the quality of work, in other words it is supposed to be divinely ordained, even Lord Krishna pleads his inability to change it himself.

Sri Aurobindo has accepted this rigid caste division of labour and justifies it very frankly as:

There are thus four kinds of works, the work of religious ministration, letters, learning and knowledge, the work of government, politics, administration and war; the work of production, wealth-making and exchange; the work of hired labour and service. And *endeavour was made to found and stabilise the whole arrangement of society* on the partition of these four functions among four clearly marked classes. (Dilip Roy, *Gita—A Revelation*, in which he quotes Sri Aurobindo, p 35, emphasis mine.)

It is, however, a little difficult for Dilip Roy to accept this without reservation. He therefore argues in the following pages that “while men are not born equal” etc. he poses the question whether “the Gita’s is a gospel meant only for the elect as against the common man”. He provides the answer in a way through his conception of yoga—*samata* that is, ‘equality’ as ‘the essence of yoga’, so much so that ‘an aspirant cannot win to the status of seerhood till he has grown to see with an equal eye the learned and modest Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog and the outcast’. (V. 18).

A man of common clay must be pardoned for his inability to follow Dilip Roy to these rarefied heights of spiritual reasoning. And in return we may also be permitted to quote from *Gita* III, 35 where it is said:

*sreyan svadharma vigunah
paradharma swanusthitat
swadharma nidhanam sreyah*

paradharma bhayavahah. (Better is one’s own law though imperfectly carried out than the law of another carried out per-

fectly. Better is death in (the fulfilment of) of one's own law, for to follow another's law is perilous—Radhakrishnan's translation.)

Only we will respectfully submit *svadharma* is not 'law' as Radhakrishnan here puts it. We must also quote in this connection another verse, XVIII, 48—this is almost at the end of *Gita*, where Lord Krishna says:

*sahajam karma kaunteya
sadosam apina tyajet
sarvarambha hi dosena*

dhumenagnir va vrtah. (One should not give up his work suited to one's nature, O son of Kunti, though it may be defective, for all enterprises are clouded by defects as fire by smoke).

And all this is finally summed up, as it were, by XVIII, 66, the very last verse of Lord Krishna's teaching when the Lord says:

*Sarvadharmam parityajya
mam ekam saranam vraja
aham tva sarvapapebhyo*

moksayisyami masucah. (Abandoning all duties, come to Me alone for shelter. Be not grieved for I shall release thee from all evils—Radhakrishnan's translation).

The above three verses along with the others we have quoted before lays down in full what is meant by *swadharma*, that is, task or duty determined by one's caste or *varna* which is unchangeable and the fulfilment of which duty through *niskam karma*, that is, work done without awaiting or expecting any results is the way to *mokhsa* or salvation according to *Gita*. It is evident that this laying down of a soldier-like discipline (theirs not to reason why etc.) could certainly provide a suitable weapon for the early or non-class phase of the national movement but can in time also act as a tool for social conservatism and an ideological base for class stability and class harmony.

It is to be said that even Dilip Roy with his efforts to solve all contradictions through yoga could not quite stomach this rigid caste division and says: "...the modern mind cannot help but feel repelled in particular by the heartless exploitation of

the have-nots of the lower caste, the *sudras*." (Dilip Roy, *Ibid*, p 39).

Swami Vivekananda never accepted this caste division. Throughout in his teachings and utterances, he not only castigated against the caste system but also said in a startling statement that after the rule by the Brahmins, that is, the elite—the kind of philosopher-kings of Plato—came the rule of the Kshatriyas, the rule of the powerful, and that while the present ruling class are the Vaisyas that is, the merchants (or one could say the capitalists), the future belongs to the rule of the *sudras*, the rule by the down-trodden.

This *swadharma* is to be performed by not awaiting for or expecting any results. The oft-quoted II, 47 bears repetition:

Karmany eva 'dhikaras te

ma phalesu kadacana

ma karmaphalahetur bhur

ma te sango 'stu akarmani. (To action alone has thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction—Radhakrishnan's translation).

This *niskama karma* is to be performed by a person who is *stitha-pragya*, (vide II, 55 and 56) that is, by one who "puts all the desires of his mind... whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear and rage have passed away, he is called a sage of settled intelligence." (*Ibid*)

Now to note the contradictions further in this teaching of *niskama karma*. If one were to follow the slokas from III, 8 to 16, one would tend to conclude that Lord Krishna is speaking in justification of sacrificial rites performed in *yagnas*. But he reverts back to the conception of a *stitha-pragya* doing *niskama karma* from III, 17 to 19 of which the last one may be quoted: "...without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment."

But there is a further glaring contradiction which occurs before the famous sloka of II, 47. This is the sloka II, 37 which runs as follows:

*hato va prapsyasi svargam
jñtva va bhoksyase mahim
tasmad uttistha kaunteya*

yuddhaya krtaniscayah. (Either slain thou shalt go to heaven,; or victorious thou shalt enjoy the earth; therefore arise, O son of Kunti, resolved on battle).

This is certainly not *niskama karma*. Lord Krishna is holding out a bait for Arjuna that he is the winner in the end whether he wins the battle or gets killed (reminds one of the adage: 'Head I win, tail you lose').

Bankim Chandra noted the contradiction. According to him, the slokas II, 34 to 36 belong to an inferior set of ideas where Krishna seems to have cautioned Arjuna against *Lok-ninda* that is, public censure or the danger of losing one's popularity. He hastens to add that this cannot be true *dharma* but "in our modern society *dharma* is so weak in its appeal that very often it is the fear of incurring public censure that takes the place of (practising) *dharma*." (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, *Works*, Vol I, p 723).

Bankim Chandra also makes it quite clear that in his opinion these four slokas from II, 33 to 37 are interpolated in the text of Gita after Sankara's interpretation in the ninth century.

GITA COULD INSPIRE our fighters for national freedom also because of its teaching of soul as the indestructible one. As the body changes form like one discards a worn-out garment and puts on a new one, the soul remains eternal. The entire set of slokas from II, 11 to 30 propounds this concept of indestructibility of the soul through various forms and metaphors, only one of which (II, 20) may be quoted here:

*na jayate mriyate va kadacin
na yam bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah
ajo nityah sasvato yam purano*

na hanyate hanyamane sarire. (He is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having (once) come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain).

This conception of the indestructibility of the soul is borrowed in Gita from *Katho-Upanishad*, II, 18 and also *Chandogya-Upanishad* speaks along the same lines.

One may couple with this the theory of transmigration of soul (*janmantar-bad*) which is implicit in Hinduism and Hindu religion. This theory of transmigration of the soul was incorporated into Buddhism by Mahajan after the second century A.D. This is how Bankim Chandra puts it in his booklet, *Srimad Bhagavadgita*:

The first thesis of *Gita* is the indestructibility of the soul. While the indestructibility of the soul is the first thesis of Hindu religion, transmigration of the soul is its second... This transmigration of the soul is very strong in Hindu religion. Hindu religion as per Upanishad, as per Gita, as per Puranas, or as per its philosophy, every kind of Hindu religion is based on it. As pearls are strung in a bead through strings, simi-

larly this theory (that is, transmigration of soul) is linked through this string." (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, *Works*, Vol. I. pp 701ff, literal translation).

No doubt it is the indestructibility of the soul and the theory of its transmigration through a succession of births which inspired a Khudiram to mount the gallows with a copy of Gita in his hand, and we can fondly recall Khudiram's farewell song in this connection *Ebar bidae de ma, ghure asi* (Bid me now goodbye, O dear Mother, I will come back again).

Of extreme relevance in this context is to see what the infamous Rowlatt Committee Report (1918) has to say on the influence of Bhagwad-Gita on the national movement. As we know the report given under the name of its chairman, S. A. T. Rowlatt was almost entirely based on the facts compiled by James Cambell Kerr, ICS, now available as *Political Trouble in India, 1907-17*, published by Editions Indian, Calcutta.

It is interesting to note also that "while Mr. Rowlatt publicly thanked all who appeared before the committee ...the only person he did not thank was James Campbell Kerr... it was not possible because... *Political Trouble in India, 1907-17* was a secret and confidential work..." (Preface by Mahadev Prasad Saha).

Let us now quote from the book itself:

"Dayananda, the Theosophists, Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita and all that followed them talked in the wildest and most extravagant way in praise of Hinduism and in condemnation of Christianity and the West so that they actually led the average educated Hindu to believe the doctrine, that everything Western is materialistic, sensual, devilish. I do not believe that these leaders had any sinister political motive for this policy." (p xiv).

There is a whole chapter in this *Political Trouble in India, 1907-17*, entitled "The Literature and the Revolution."

In this chapter the most prominent place has been ascribed to 'The Bhagwad Gita and Chandi', 'Works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya', his novel *Ananda Math* etc. Similarly, the

whole conception of 'Bhowani Mandir' was developed as a pamphlet by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, later the sage of Pondicherry, but then the fire-brand revolutionary, a first class classic scholar of Oxford University and one of the foremost accused in the Muraripukur-Maniktolla bomb case of 1908. It is quoted in detail. We can only quote here the main point: Bhawani, another name for goddess Durga, is described as *Shakti*—"in the present age, the Mother is manifested as the mother of Strength. She is pure *Shakti*." (p 32). Our knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, or *Jnana* "stored and accumulated since the race began" of many thousands of years is "now weighed down with a heavy load of *tamas*, lies under the curse of impotence and inertia." India is equated to *Shakti*: "it is a mighty *shakti*, composed of the shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation..."

It is easy to see that from this conception of *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*—Karma to Shakti i.e. utter dedication without awaiting or expecting any results and through unquestioning obedience or Bhakti leads to strength or Shakti and from which real Jnana or Sawtya Jnana is evolved—this was made the ideological basis of those first generation of national revolutionaries, miscalled 'terrorists'. But there is no escaping the fact that this strong imprint of Hindu religious conception helped to alienate the followers of Islam.

In a sub-section entitled 'The Bhagwad Gita and Chandi' James Campbell Kerr first notes that 17 copies of the *Gita* were found in the Dacca *Anushilan Samiti*, with four copies of *Chandi*, and three copies of the *Gita* were found in the Maniktolla garden.

The three aspects of *Bhagavad-Gita* were particularly stressed: (i) the soul is indestructible (*Na Hanyate Hanyamane sarire* etc.), (ii) the conception of the ideal man as one who is *sthita-pragya* i.e. "one whose heart is not agitated in the midst of calamities, who has no longing for pleasures and from whom affection, fear and wrath have departed is called a sage of steady mind" and of course the whole conception of *karma* and *niskama karma* at that.

Kerr points out that the Bengali paper 'Jugantar' (1908 with

Bhupendranath Dutt, Swami Vivekananda's younger brother as its editor) carried on its front page as its motto a quotation from Gita :

paritrānaya sādhanam
vināsaya ca duskṛitram
dharma-samsthāpanārthaya
sambhavamī "yuge-yuge" (IV. 8).

We can also refer to the previous sloka (IV. 7):

Yada-yada hi dharmasya
glānir bhavati bhārata
abhyut thanam adharma-sya
tadātmanam sṛjamy aham.

The British colonial rule is *adharma-raj*. Lord Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna that "whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness... then I send forth (create, incarnate myself)" and "for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age" (Dr. Radhakrishnan's translation) is easily interpreted as a call to overthrow that *adharma-raj*, the rule of unrighteousness. And the fight is to be waged through karma without questioning and awaiting for any results, i.e. *niskama karma* performed by a true soldier of the revolution ('there's not to question why' sort of conception—the motto of the rising bourgeoisie) and in which the soul being indestructible, one can give away one's life like changing one's own old garments for a new one.

Kerr also points out that when Anushilan Samity was formed in 1908 (the name 'Anushilan' was borrowed from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya as we have noted) in Benares, the title later changed to 'Young Men's Association' to avoid undue attention, of the police, "the Society contained an inner circle, consisting of those who were fully initiated into its real objects and sedition was mainly taught through a so-called moral class in which Bhagwat-Gita was so interpreted as to furnish a justification for assassination". (p 343—we ignore Kerr's language—DB).

We can also mention that in the initiation of a young man

to revolutionary work he had to take a vow before the goddess Kali with a sword and a copy of *Gita* in his hands.

* * *

Last but not least in this line of interpretation of *Bhagavad-gita* was the series of lectures given by Mahatma Gandhi to the inmates of his Ashram in Ahmedabad from February 24 to November 27, 1926, collected now as a book by Orient Paperbacks.

To Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, the problem was how to interpret *Gita* which is patently a call to armed action, an exhortation to Arjuna who like a true votary of non-violence had initially given up his *gandiva* bow and refused to fight. Mahatma Gandhi resolves this dilemma at the very outset by interpreting the battlefield of Kurukhestra as "our body": "The poet-seer who knows from experience the problems of life, has given a faithful account of the conflict which is eternally going on within us. Sri Krishna is the lord dwelling in everyone's heart who is ever murmuring. His promptings in a pure chitta (that is, conscious mind—DB) like a clock ticking in a room. If the clock of the *chitta* is not wound up with the key of self-purification, the in-swelling Lord no doubt remains, where He is, but the tickling is heard no more." (p 14).

Mahatma Gandhi also makes it clear that non-violence is to be practised only by a *sitha-pragya*; otherwise "I do not wish to suggest that violence has no place at all in the teaching of the *Gita*. The *dharma* which it teaches does not mean that a person who has not yet awakened to the truth of non-violence may act like a coward. Anyone who fears others, accumulates possessions and indulges in sense-pleasures will certainly fight with violent means, but violence does not, for that reason, become justified as his *dharma*..." (p 14).

Be that as it may, Mahatma Gandhi also accepts the conception of *Dharma* as *swadharma* mentioned earlier by saying: "Arjuna had said that he did not want even the kingdom of gods if he had to kill his kith and kin for that. *But he is bound, in any case to kill them, for he has accepted the dharma which requires him to kill.*" (p 32, emphasis mine).

One would like to pose the counter-question to Gandhiji

himself: "But it is you who taught us the use of the weapon of passive resistance if one's conscience does not permit an action?"

But Mahatma Gandhi goes on expounding this conception of *dharma* or *swadharma* as doing one's duty determined according to one's station in life. He says a few pages later: "To speak the truth is a *dharma* common to all. But there are special duties, that is, duties which pertain to individuals. Suppose that one's job is to clean lavatories. Such a person should not envy another whose job is to keep accounts. The man who cleans lavatories as carefully as he does the utensils in his home observes his *dharma* in the truest manner. It would not be right for Arjuna to think of retiring to a forest and spending his days telling beads on the rosary. His duty was to fight and kill. Retiring to a forest may be the right course for a rishi, it was not so for Arjuna."

Incidentally this attitude of Mahatma Gandhi will also help to explain the paradox in his theory of non-violence. One such glaring instance is when he refused to support the cause of the Garhwali soldiers in the midst of the stormy 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement who had refused to fire on unarmed crowd in Peshawar.

Later in 1932 at the time of his stay in London for the Round Table Conference, he was pointedly asked about it by Charles Petrasch, correspondent of the French paper, *Monde* (February 20, 1932). His reply stems from this approach of *swadharma-palana* as per Gita mentioned above. This is what he said:

"A soldier who disobeys an order to fire breaks the oath which he has taken and renders himself guilty of criminal disobedience. I cannot ask officials and soldiers to disobey: for when I am in power, I shall in all likelihood make use of those same officials, and those same soldiers. If I taught them to disobey I should be afraid that they might do the same when I am in power." (Quoted by R. Palme Dutt in *India Today*, Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta, p 369).

Mahatma Gandhi interprets *bhakti* in even simpler terms. Quoting IV. 11, we give here Gandhiji's translation: "In whatever way men resort to Me, even so do I render to them. In every day, O Partha, the path men follow is Mine."

He then comments: "In other words, people reap as they sow. As the quality of your *bhakti*, so is its reward. If there is any motive behind your *bhakti* if you seek anything through it, you will get what the quality of your *bhakti* entitles you to, You will get not what you wish to get, but you deserve to get". (p 119).

Having said the above, Gandhiji then refers to his controversy with Tilak which is of great interest and bears quoting in full:

'Everyone follows a path which leads to me'. This verse has a history behind it. When Tilak Maharaj was alive, he had cited this verse in the course of a discussion about violence and non-violence. I had argued that we should bear with a person who might have slapped us. In reply, he cited this verse to prove that the *Gita* upheld the principle of 'tit for tat'. That is, he should act towards a person as he acts towards us. I cling to the reply which I gave to him then. I had argued that this verse could not be used in support of his contention. We should not act towards a person as he acts towards us. If he is bad to us, we may not therefore be bad to him. This verse merely lays down God's law (p 120).

As far as we are concerned there is a basic unity between the two positions of Tilak and Gandhiji in so far as both interpreted the foreign colonial rule as an anathema and against God's law, while the particular method of fighting may be a little different arising perhaps out of the temperamental difference of the two giants of our national movement.

Rabindranath Tagore however was never impressed or influenced by *Gita*. In his whole voluminous corpus of writings while he quotes copiously from Upanishads and is influenced very greatly by simple forms of *Bhakti* in its various manifestations, he usually adopted the attitude of a lover to his beloved or an identification of his self with his *jiban-devata* (life-deity) but hardly that of a son to his mother (the Kali cult of mother-worship), the only oblique reference to *Gita* is worth referring

In 1932 when he had just passed 70, he went to Iran (then called Persia) at the Royal invitation, and he wrote about it in a booklet named *In Persia* (*Rabindra-Rachanabali*, Vol. XXII, p 433 ff.) He had to go by air and this was his first long trip by air (he had undertaken previously one short trip from London to Paris). He records at length his journey by air and his observations of an air journey when the planes flew at a much lower height is very interesting. The relevant portions we are giving here in almost literal translation:

...The Earth which I knew for its variety and certainty (namely, it is there—DB) through its many testimonies became thin (or tenuous) and its three dimensional reality gradually started reducing itself to what was a two-dimensional photograph... It seems to me that in this position when man emerges from the plane to rain down a hundred-killer (a *sataghni*—that is, furious destruction by bombs which can kill hundreds at a time, how small this figure is in terms of today's atom and hydrogen bombs—DB) he can be mercilessly furious. He suffers from no sense of the enormity of the crime which can make his raised hand tremble in hesitation to do it because the actual computation of figures (in terms of figures of destruction—DB) gets lost or vanishes. When the reality to which man has a natural affinity gets blurred, then the receptacle of his affection also disappears. *The tenets and teachings of Gita is such a kind of 'aeroplane'—the mind of Arjuna tender with mercy was taken to such a height from where one could not discern who is the killer and who is the killed, who is your kith and kin and who is your stranger.* Man has in its armoury many such 'aeroplanes' made of theories to cover up reality in his policies of imperialism (or aggrandisement), in social and religious principles. From there (that is, basing oneself on these principles—DB) the only consolation a man has when destruction descends on him is—"na hanyate hanvamane sarire" (that is, the soul cannot be killed—Gita's sloka, II. 20). (emphasis mine).

The reader will no doubt note the sarcastic reference to this sloka of Gita.

IT WILL BE interesting to trace the elements of the main thoughts in the present-day school of Hindu revivalist thinking as represented by M. S. Golwalkar and RSS in his *Bunch of Thoughts*.^{*} He published this in a book form first in 1966 which ran into several reprints. In May 1980, a second revised and enlarged edition has been published. The original edition had also an Introduction by M. A. Venkata Rao to whom the book is dedicated. Of its 38 chapters running into 683 pages we can but quote here only a small portion and that also in relation to our main contention, viz. how Bhagavad-Gita provides one of the main kernels of this modern version of Hindu revivalist thoughts.

Hindus, to Golwalkar, constitute the nation residing in the sacred motherland of India and they alone are the enlightened ones, the rest being *mlechhas*. Incidentally, one could easily come across a similar statement from the Islamic revivalist thought which holds everybody else except a true Mussalman as the *kafir*. Intense nationalistic arrogance and a good deal of racial hatred are preached thus: "...We built a great civilisation, a great culture and an unique social order. We had brought into actual life almost everything that was beneficial to mankind. Then the rest of humanity was just *bipeds* and so no distinctive name was given to us. Sometimes, in trying to distinguish our people from others, we were called 'the enlightened'—the Aryas—and the rest Mlechhas."

* "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was started in 1925 on the day of Vijyadashami. The founder, revered Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, passed away in 1940. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar popularly known as Guruji—has been the chief of the organisation since then". (from the Preface to the First Edition).

"Sri Golwalkar is no more. But his thoughts are with us" (a note by the Publishers dated 15 January, 1980).

(*Bunch of Thoughts*, second revised edition, p 73). (Emphasis mine).

Historically, this would be quite untenable. First, there was a lot of inter-marriages between the Indo-Aryans and other sections of the population. Second, the non-Aryans were initially called the 'Yavans', really another name for the Greeks, some of whom were later absorbed into the texture of ancient Indian society.

To proceed. "Our concept of Hindu Nation is not a mere bundle of political and economic rights. It is essentially cultural. Our ancient and sublime cultural values of life form its life-breath." (*Ibid*, p 43). But this culture is to be felt only and cannot often be defined.

Then the real point is made which is division into castes and which as we have seen was propounded by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in Gita (*chaturvarna maya srastam* etc.) Says Golwalkar:

"The Hindu people... is the Virat Purusha, the Almighty manifesting himself." Then from the *Purusha Sukta* is quoted. 'Brahmin is the head, King the hands, Vaishya the thighs and Shudra the feet'. Golwalkar comments: "This means that the people who have this fourfold arrangement, i.e. the Hindu people, is our God." Further, "this supreme vision of Godhead in society is the very core of our concept of 'nation' and has permeated our thinking and given rise to various unique concepts of our cultural heritage." (pp 48-49).

Golwalkar does not mince matters. He is blunt and always to the point. He therefore goes on further propounding Hinduism as the basis of Indian nationhood as follows:

"The other main feature that distinguished our society was the *Varna-vyavastha*. But today it is being dubbed 'casteism' and scoffed at. Our people have come to feel that the mere mention of *Varna-vyavastha* is something derogatory. They often mistake the social order implied in it for social discrimination." (pp 142-43).

So we are to believe that there is no social discrimination not

to say stark terror and repression in the name of this caste distinction. Let us see how he proceeds:

“The feeling of inequality, of high and low, which has crept into the *Varna* system, is COMPARATIVELY OF RECENT ORIGIN. The perversion was given a further fillip by the scheming Britisher in line with his ‘divide and rule’ policy. But IN ITS ORIGINAL FORM, THE DISTINCTIONS IN THAT SOCIAL ORDER DID NOT IMPLY ANY DISCRIMINATION SUCH AS BIG AND SMALL, HIGH AND LOW, AMONG ITS CONSTITUENTS. ON THE OTHER HAND GITA TELLS US THAT THE INDIVIDUAL WHO DOES HIS ASSIGNED DUTIES IN LIFE IN A SPIRIT OF SELFLESS SERVICE ONLY WORSHIPS GOD THROUGH SUCH PERFORMANCE.” (all small caps mine, p 143).

The British imperialist rule undoubtedly exploited our caste division to further their policy of ‘divide and rule’. But is this varna system based on discrimination only of recent origin? What about the story of Sambuka in *Ramayana* and the fate of Karna who was denied training by Drona in *Mahabharata*? And then Gita undoubtedly tells us that the individual must perform his duties according to his station in life—the essence of Gita’s conception of *Karma* and *swadharma-palana*.

Golwalkar not only justifies the whole *chaturvarna* system as the basis of Hinduism, indeed he is quite logical in this in his lights and we don’t grudge him that, but what is of further interest to us here is that he extends it to the concept of Hindu as the only national in India and in doing so has to stress even more its socially conservative role. So in page 156 under a sub-heading, ‘A Duty by Birth’ he develops this further:

“Let us all remember that this oneness (in making up the Hindu as a nation—DB) is ingrained in our blood from our very birth, because we are all born as Hindus. For a Hindu, he gets the first *samskar* when he enters the mother’s womb, and the last when his body is consigned to the flames... Therefore, to strengthen the unity and spirit of identity in our society is a duty born with our birth, our *sahaja karma*. And that which is our *sahaja karma* must not be given up even if it may appear to be defective, says the Gita.” (p 156).

This concept of *sahaja karma*, the very basis of social con-

servatism and therefore of stability for the ruling exploiting class—the Brahmins and Kshatriyas over the Sudras—in old times and now refurbished in a slightly different garb is presented by Golwalkar thus:

“Our definition of *dharmā* is twofold. The first is proper rehabilitation of man’s mind; and the second is adjustment of various individuals for a harmonious corporate existence, i.e. a good social order to hold the people together.” (p 59).

Golwalkar totally denies the secular character of the modern democratic state based on territory and other criterion of citizenship. According to him, “the mere fact of birth or nurture in a particular territory, without a corresponding mental pattern, can never give a person the status of a national in that land. *Mental allegiance has been, in fact, the universally accepted criterion for nationality.*” (p. 167, emphasis mine).

We need not join issue with him as to whether this is the ‘universal criterion of nationality’. What is of relevance to us here is that this ‘mental allegiance’ comes through imbibing the Hindu *sanskars* which we have quoted above and is thus developed elsewhere by Golwalkar:

“...we say that we have to imbibe deep and positive *sanskars* of our nationhood which shall not allow us to be swept off our feet by political or other considerations. It is of no use to speak of Hindu Nationhood and the eminence of Hindu way of life without a corresponding life-pattern in our practical day-to-day behaviour.” (pp 80-81).

India is the land of the Hindus only and the other non-Hindu population can only exist, according to Golwalkar, under sufferance and as second-class citizens. Let us see how he puts it:

“We must revive once again the *parakrama-vad*. (It is mentioned a few lines earlier in the previous paragraph to this that *parakrama-vad* means assimilation-ism—DB). For that, we should make it clear that the non-Hindu who lives here has a *rashtra dharma* (national responsibility), a *samaja dharma* (duty to society), a *kula dharma* (duty to ancestors), and only in his *vyakti dharma* (personal faith) he can choose any path which

satisfies his spiritual urge. If, even after fulfilling all those various duties in social life, anybody says that he has studied Quran Sherif or the Bible and that way of worship strikes a sympathetic chord in his heart, that he can pray better through that path of devotion, we have absolutely no objection. Thus he has his choice in a portion of his individual life. For the rest, he must be one with the national current. That is real assimilation." (pp 173-74).

We have to be thankful to Golwalkar for giving this concession to the non-Hindu section of the population in 'a portion of his individual life.' But in plain language he makes it clear that national integration can only take place, only when a person has accepted the Hindu conception of life—that is the mental allegiance and criterion of Indian nationality and for which a person must not only accept caste divisions but also imbibe all the *samskars* etc. to make it his *dharma* in all its aspects, his *rashtra*, his *samaja* and *kula*—his *sahaja karma*—in a word this is Gita's *swadharma-palana* par excellence.

We have already said that Golwalkar is very logical in his understanding and presentation of things. With this conception of Hinduism and Hindu Rashtra, he therefore devotes three chapters, XVI, 1 and 2 and 3, naming them as "Internal Threats", and serialising them as "1. Muslims", "2. Christians", and "3. the Communists". The two chapters preceding XVI viz. XIV and XV are entitled as follows: XIV in two parts: 1. Hindu Rashtra and 'Minorities', 2. Hindu Rashtra and Secularism, followed by XV which is: 'Affirm Basic Truths'. We will have to examine all these and to avoid lengthy quotations a certain amount of summarisation will have to be done.

What is expected of the 'religious minorities' is "the shedding of the notions of their being 'religious minorities' as also their 'foreign mental complexion' and merging themselves in the 'common national stream of this soil'" (p 208). Therefore it is suggested that these 'religious minorities' should become proper Hindus to qualify for the citizenship of the Hindu Rashtra or Indian state of Golwalkar's conception by imbibing in full, even mentally, all those Hindu *samskars* and certainly accepting the caste divisions. He refers in this connection to the Indo-

nesian Muslims teaching *Ramayana* to their children, as if the *Ramakatha* or the story of *Ramayana* belongs to the Hindus alone. The *Ramakatha* extends well into the whole region of south-east Asia with India as its centre. We may also draw the attention of Golwalkar's followers to the culture of our neighbouring state, Bangladesh, majority of whose citizens happen to be of Islamic faith but who have fully accepted the entire tradition of Bengali culture from Ram Mohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore and are engaged in enriching the Bengali language and culture with some original research work on these and other allied subjects.

In affirming Basic Truths, it is said: "We are one country, *one society*, and one nation with a community of life-values and secular aspirations and interests, and hence it is natural that the affairs of the nation are governed through a single state of the *unitary* type." (p 224, emphasis mine).

It is obvious that here we have the basic ingredients of a fascistic type of state. And this is ideologically buttressed further by identifying *swadharma* with *swadesh*. And it is in this vein blandly asserted: "people whose loyalty to the country and her traditions, to her heroes down the centuries, to her security and prosperity, is undivided and unadulterated, are national" (p 229).

Hence, Muslims are alien when they talk in terms of protecting Muslim interests (p 246). As for Christians, "their activities are not merely irreligious, they are also anti-national" (p 251). And as for communists,—this is the third item under 'Internal Threats' after the Muslims and the Christians, Golwalkar is in a somewhat confused state. For to him, communists are a sworn enemy of democratic procedure, but leaders are taking up their slogans and making them respectable. And then there is the rationality of science against faith which he cannot stomach and says: "So any attempt, from whatever quarter, to uproot our ancient and life-giving faith, a faith which has sustained us and produced the finest flowers of human culture, is bound to bring about sure national disaster" (p 260).

Then the wicked communists' slogan of 'land to the tiller' against the impotency of the Bhoodan movement by Vinoba

Bhave "will only give rise to an impression in the mass mind that after all communism is correct and is inevitable" (p 260). And lastly, the government itself by declaring "'Socialism' (same in content as communism and differing only in the method of achievement) as their goal" (p 260) makes the threat of communism "real from another quarter in our country" (p 261). Hence do away with all "foreign theories and 'ism'." This is "highly humiliating to a country which has given rise to an all-comprehensive philosophy, capable of furnishing the true and abiding basis for reconstruction of national life on political, economic, social and all other planes. It would be sheer bankruptcy of our intellect and originality if we believe that human intelligency has reached its zenith with the present theories and 'isms' of the West" (p 265).

This is certainly preaching a kind of national exclusiveness which is another name for obscurantism. And to say that 'isms' belong to the West betray not only deliberate ignorance of our own national heritage but also an element of demagoguery is to be discerned here.

It should not be difficult to present an almost exact parallel from the Islamic revivalist writings to what Golwalkar is preaching here and is now actively taken up by the RSS in its various training camps and the like. Similarly, the present theocratic Islamic state of Pakistan has virtually declared all its non-Muslim sections of the population as second-class citizens.

In this whole approach of Golwalkar of building up a Hindu Rashtra certainly as a theocratic Hindu state, and which if it ever comes into being will be almost a replica of the present theocratic Islamic state of Pakistan, Bhagavad-Gita has provided one of the main ideological basis. Hinduism as the basis of Indian nationalism which qualifies a person to be a citizen of the Hindu Rashtra of Golwalkar's thoughts and designs is based on varnasram i.e. caste division and karma of swadharma-palana, i.e. doing one's duty according to the station in life to which one is born and without awaiting for any results. Golwalkar quotes the famous sloka of Bhagavad-Gita of 'swadharma nidhana sreyas' etc. to "rekindle the Hindu way of life brushing off the ashes of self-forgetfulness and imitation covering the immoral embers of the age-old *samskars* in the Hindu heart so that the

pure flame of the National Self of this sacred land will once again blaze forth in all its effulgence,” and which therefore “comes up before us as the call of the National Swadharma” (p 87).

The early nationalist leaders in utilising *Gita* to rouse national consciousness against alien rule overlooked the strong Hindu revivalist character with which they were imprinting our national movement. A parallel movement developed under the Islamic faith which should be traced but not within our purview here. Gandhiji tried to bring the two under one front by his Congress-Khilafat unity but failed largely because whatever the temporary advantages, a mass movement has to advance on its mass and class demands and necessarily has to be secular in character. In the present context, when national not social liberation is on the agenda, this old imprint of Hindu religious ideology on our national movement in the hands of a Golwalkar and the RSS today provides the very theoretical basis of a theocratic fascistic type of Hindu Rashtra and they find it handy to utilise *Gita* for the purpose. Thus the original *Swadharma* of *Gita* which was introduced to strengthen the class exploitation of a Brahmanical state of ancient India is now elevated further to a *National Swadharma*.

GITA IS SO comprehensive in its treatment and encompasses such a vast field of different schools of thinking that it is easy to read many and often very contradictory things into Gita. It is violence and non-violence, it is *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* all combined, it also deals at length with *sanyas*, *yoga*, cosmic evolution and even some sort of evolution of life.

The main common denominator in all these aspects of Gita is no doubt a defence of class society and class oppression arising out of its conception of *swadharma* performed by a *stitha-pragya* person. Dr. D.D. Kosambi has put it very bluntly as follows:

...the utility of the Gita derives from its peculiar fundamental defect, namely, dexterity in seeming to reconcile the irreconcilable. The high god repeatedly emphasises the great virtue of non-killing (*ahimsa*), yet the entire discourse is an incentive to war. So II. 19ff (already quoted) says that it is impossible to kill or be killed... In Chapter XI the terrified Arjuna sees all the warriors of both sides rush into a gigantic Visnu-Krsna's innumerable voracious mouth (*Visvarupa-darshan*) and though the *yajna* sacrifice is played down or derided it is admitted in III. 14 to be the generator of rain, without which food and life would be impossible." (D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, p 17).

We have to record that none of the popular forms of religion, the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra, the *Mahanubhava* or *Manbhav* sect founded by Cakradhara in the twelfth century upholding the ideals of tribal and communal life, *Jnaneswar* and *Namdev*, some of whose teachings were incorporated into the *Grantha Saheb* providing the basis of the popular form of Sikhism among the Punjab peasantry, nor the movement represented by Kabir, himself a weaver of Benaras claiming both

Hindus and Muslims as his followers or Chai'yana founding his Vaishnavite cult of *bhakti* in Bengal sought inspiration from the Gita.

We can refer to Frederick Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany* in this context: "It is clear that under the circumstances all the generally voiced attacks against feudalism, above all the attacks against the church, and all revolutionary social and political doctrines had mostly and simultaneously to be the theological heresies. The existing social relations had to be stripped of their halo of sanctity before they could be attacked.

"The revolutionary opposition to feudalism was alive all down the Middle Ages. It took the shape of mysticism, open heresy, or armed insurrection, all depending on the conditions of the time." (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p 42.)

Indeed these popular forms of religious movement was the direct expression of a sense of acute social discontent. But unable to work a way out of the prevailing social malady and injustice the preachers of these religious sects—a kind of people's priests they were—they often resorted to *bhakti* or devotion to God, sometime even expressed as that of a lover to his beloved (the Vaishnav movement) or that of a son to his mother (the Kali cult). Thus Sri Ramakrishna Paramhangsa, the guru of Swami Vivekananda and a devotee of goddess Kali loved a song in which occurs a line:

Kare dao Ma Indra-pada

Kare karo adhogami. (Some you, Mother, raise to the throne and to some You take them down to lower depths). This acute social discontent is ultimately sought to be resolved by them through abject surrender to one's fate in the name of *bhakti* as expressed in the song:

Sakali tomari Icchha

Icchhamaye Tara Toomi

Tomar karma Toomi karo Ma

Loke bale kari ami. (Everything is according to your wish, You are the goddess Tara who wills all. It is You who is doing,

karma, everything, but people think or say as if it is I who is doing it).

What must be noted therefore with all this resigned attitude (the sophisticated will say all this is *tamasic* but it is a rigma-role and we are not interested with the niceties of it here), these popular forms of religious movement had a revolutionary content in the context of their time and therefore stood poles apart from the highly refined teachings of Gita concealing defence of class rule, stability and privileges.

This dual aspect of acute discontent coupled with an attitude of abject surrender which acts as a palliative is very aptly described by Karl Marx when he says:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx-Engels, *On Religion*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975, p 39, emphasis in the original).

It is interesting further to quote Frederick Engels from his *The Peasant War in Germany* on this class position of the people's priests:

There were two distinct classes among the clergy. The clerical feudal hierarchy formed the *aristocratic* class: the bishops and archbishops, abbots, priors, and other prelates. These high church dignitaries were either imperial princes themselves, or reigned as feudal lords under the sovereignty of other princes over extensive lands with numerous serfs and bondsmen. They not only exploited their dependents as ruthlessly as the knights and princes, but went at it with even less shame. Alongside brute force they applied all the subterfuges of religion...

The *plebeian* part of the clergy consisted of rural and urban preachers. These stood outside the feudal church hierarchy and had no part in its riches. ...Of burgher or plebeian origin, they stood close enough to the life of the masses to retain their burgher and plebeian sympathies in

spite of their clerical status. While monks were an exception in the movements of their time, the plebeian clergy was the rule. They provided the movement with theorists and ideologists, and many of them, representatives of the plebeians and peasants, died on the scaffold. The popular hatred for the clergy turned against them only in isolated cases. (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, pp 33 & 34).

The Marathi *bhakti* poets faced untold hardship and hatred of the Brahmins of their times. The protest was expressed in Maharashtra from 12th century onwards by two different groups both orientated towards Krishna-worship. One was the Mahanubhava or Manbhav sect, founded by Chakradhara in the 12th century. "Black garments, absolute rejection of all the caste system, organisation into clan-like sub-groups, sharing among members and a greatly simplified marriage and ritual (*gada-bada-gunda*) prove this... The other movement crystallised by Jnaneswar was particularly strong among the seasonal *varkari* pilgrims to Pandharpur who followed a custom which seems to date back to the mesolithic age." (*Myth and Reality* by D. D. Kosambi, p 33)... "The Paithan brahman Eknath to whom we owe the present text of the Jnaneswari (in 1590 A.D., now available in Bengali translation also) as well as many fine Marathi poems went out of his way to break the crudest restrictions of untouchability. The greatest of them all, the 16th century *Kunabi* peasant and petty grain-dealer Tukaram survived grim famine, the unremitting jealousy of contemporary folk-poets and the contemptuous hatred of brahmins ultimately to drown himself in the river." (*Ibid*, p 34).

Prof. B. G. Sardar in his valuable book *Saint-poets of Maharashtra*, (Their Impact on Society), rendered into English from the original Marathi by Kumud Mehta, published by Orient Longman, has given some historical background to the origin of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra from 12th to the end of the 17th century—a long line of poets from Jnaneswara to Eknath, Tukaram and Ramdas in Chatrapati Shivaji's times.

Prof. Sardar points out that the movement of the saints, unlike that of the Reformation in Europe which was an expression of the struggle of the rising bourgeoisie to do away with feudal economic order and its hierarchical institutions, sanc-

tioned by the high priests of the Roman Catholic Church "sought to establish equality in religious life alone... and did not at all feel the need to interfere in the social system of the time." What must be noted is that all of them rigidly bound by the cast-iron conservatism of Brahmanical hierarchy and strengthened further by the conception of *karma* (i.e. *swadharma-palana*) as enunciated by Gita found it difficult to challenge the chaturvarna and all the rest of it directly. Prof. G. B. Sardar records:

"The doctrine of *karma* and the system of caste determined by birth were far from conducive to the development of the individual; and the lower classes felt the oppressive yoke of a mental subjugation which was even more terrible than economic slavery" (p 15).

It is true that some of them like Jnaneswara (or Dnyaneshwara as spelt by Prof. Sardar) gave a twist to the interpretation of IX. 32 of Gita ("for those who take refuge in Me, though they are lowly born, women, Vaisyas, as well as Sudras, they also attain to the highest goal") to suggest a way out of caste division. This is how he interpreted the verse: "Ksatriya, vaisya, woman, sudra and untouchable retain their separate existence only so long as they have not attained Me... Just as rivers have their individual names, whether coming from east or west, only till they merge into the ocean. Whatever be the reason for which one's mind enters into Me, he then becomes Me, even as the iron that strikes to break the philosopher's stone turns into gold at the contact. So, by carnal love like the milk-maids, Kamsa in fear, Sisupala by undying hatred, Vasudeva and the Yadavas by kinship, or Narada, Dhruva, Akrura, Suka and Sanatkumarara through devotion—they all attained Me. I am the final resting place, whether they come to Me by the right or the wrong path, *bhakti*, lust or the purest love, or in enmity." (*Myth and Reality*, D. D. Kosambi, pp 35-36).

The scrutinising reader must also note in the text of the Gita (IX. 32) as quoted above that woman is placed in the same position as *sudras*, lowly born and the like and it goes without saying that in the medieval times in which the Bhakti

poets worked did not allow for an advanced bourgeois thinking. The same set of ideas can be traced in Sri Chaityanna of Bengal, also influencing Orissa and murdered by the high priests because he preached social equality, Guru Nanak of Punjab and others. What must also be noted that many of these saints, particularly in the later medieval times from fifteen century onwards were elevated after their lifetime to the position of a prophet, like an *avatar*, thereby adopting them into the fold of orthodox Hinduism and taking away the revolutionary stings out of their teachings and sayings.

It is not surprising therefore that some of these popular forms of religious movement were persecuted by the high priests of Brahmanical orthodoxy who denounced their simple ways of living and teaching thereby bringing down the gods from its *sanctum sanctorum* to the common folk. These people's priests always talked in native vernacular language, never in Sanskrit. Even Jaydev's *Gita-Gobinda* of outstanding literary merit and highly enjoyable for its musical qualities with its many aliterations and versification was simple in its presentation.

IN THE EARLY phase of the national movement, particularly when even the goal of national and political liberation could not be defined very clearly, *Gita* with its call to action, and its attitude towards the soul in the body as indestructible, its holding out the promise of a *dharma raj* provided the common ideological basis for our search for national identity and to deny the satanic rule that was the British colonial order any sanction. But as national movement sweeps forward and inevitably as class question and class demands appear on the national-political scene with the working class and the toiling masses coming forward with their own ideas of national and social liberation, the social conservative aspect of *Gita's* teachings provide a handy weapon to the Indian bourgeoisie to preach class peace and harmony. And now after Independence, with the problem of social liberation directly on the agenda, *Gita* is utilised in a big way by the Birlas and other monopoly houses with their *Gita-mahayagnas* and huge multi-coloured posters and other elaborate publicity materials which directly help them to dampen the class ardour and intensity of the class struggle in the country.

Our law-givers in general, *Manu's* and *Gita's* teachings in particular, and their interpretation of *swadharma* and their eulogies of *varnasram-dharma* denied any human status to *sudras* almost as Plato looked down upon the slaves as sub-human creatures. Today with the socialist transformation of society on the agenda it is this new type of *sudras*, the proletariat and other toiling masses who "will have to act as its decisive architects. It is of course not the negative conception of *mukti* as an imaginary escape from the world. It is the positive conception of *mukti* understood as changing the world". This is how Prof. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya sums the entire philosophical tradition in his book *What is Living and What is Dead in Indian Philosophy*.

Frederick Engels in 1892 'On the History of Early Christianity' opens his essay like this:

"The history of early Christianity has notable points in common with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people; it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freed men, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the ones as enemies of religion, the family, of the human race, the others as enemies of the state, enemies of social order. And in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead. Three hundred years after its appearance Christianity was the recognised state religion of the Roman World Empire, and in barely sixty years socialism has won itself a position which makes its victory absolutely certain." (Marx & Engels, *On Religion*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976 edition, p 275).

Today with Socialism victorious over one-third of the globe, with Soviet Union as an advanced socialist community of peoples and nations leading and charting the path forward to Communism, we can be confident of the future victory of Socialism on a world scale.

The struggle goes on in the whole capitalist world and equally in our country to establish a rational order of society based on equity, social justice and no exploitation. The ideological struggle to establish man's final superiority over nature, the triumph of reason over obscurantism and superstition, which must lead to the cognition of material reality against all dogmas quoted from Scriptures and the like,—in this Gita or for the matter of that any other religious classics or scriptures can still be enjoyed for their aesthetic value and as a source material to understand our ancient past. But to attempt to read

more, to elevate Bhagavad-Gita to a revealed knowledge and seek a panacea for world's ills today only helps the present ruling bourgeois class to prolong their system of exploitation. That needs to be ideologically combated at every stage of our struggle.

World imperialism is fighting its last ditch battle here in India. Our hoary past with its heavy traditions sanctified by our long history weighs heavily on us. The process of sifting out, what is to be accepted and rejected is not an easy task. But it is inseparable from our struggle to build Socialism and a just rational social order. And with India going the socialist way it is the final death blow to world imperialism. And that also will be the end of man's pre-history. It will be a leap for the humanity to a new dimension in his existence on this Earth, a leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.



THE PECULIARITIES OF HINDUISM

THE KEY problem of Indian history is change without a break in continuity. Its root lies in the extremely gradual growth of Indian economy resulting in the lingering of tribal customs and traditions even after the emergence and development of a class divided, exploitative society. This continuity *and* change are witnessed in every sphere of social life in India. Naturally, that is a vast and comprehensive subject. Here, we will examine how this phenomenon is expressed in the peculiarities of Hinduism as a religion.

It is often said that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. This characterisation throws no light on the issue since it only raises the question as to what that "way of life" is. Besides, it serves no purpose to use expressions which are so amorphous that they only confuse the question instead of clarifying it. It is clearly incorrect to say that Hinduism is not a religion. It has its concept of God; it has forms of worship, prayer and propitiation; it has priests who perform religious rites. So it has all the necessary ingredients of a religion.

Another peculiar feature of Hinduism, it is claimed, is that it created a common culture in the whole of the country. But this is, by no means, peculiar to Hinduism. In ancient and medieval times when religion was the binding ideological force of society all over the world, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism also did the same in respect of peoples who embraced those religions. And the adherents of these religions were spread over many countries and continents.

The only way of nailing down the peculiarities of Hinduism is to state the specific features which distinguish it from other religions. These are many. We can begin with the simplest and pass on to the more complex.

Unlike the other great religions of the world, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, Hinduism has no single founder, no sin-

gle, basic Book. It has no Christ, Mohammad or Buddha; no Bible, no Quoran and no Buddhist Canon.

Really speaking, it has no prophet, as such. It has *rishis*, *munis*, *avatars*, recognised historical figures like Shankara, as also many saints, as its religious authorities. And, with all the "revealed" nature of the most ancient *Vedas*, in reality, the *smritis*, the *Geeta*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* are no less authoritative scriptures of Hinduism than the *Vedas*. In fact, these later holy books, so far as the Hinduism of the last 1500 to 2000 years is concerned, are more authoritative than the holy of holies, the *Vedas*.

That brings us to the next peculiarity of Hinduism, that it was never "born". It "just grewed".¹ Even the words "Hindu" and "Hinduism" were coined by Muslim invaders after the eighth or ninth centuries. They were just not there from the Rig Veda to Shankara, a span of nearly 2500 years.

Since Hinduism "just grewed", naturally enough, Vedic "Hinduism" was very different from that of the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*, and the latter again, from that of the *smritis*, the *Geeta*, the *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata*, etc. which continues to our day. The difference, indeed, is so great that a Rig Vedic *rishi*, if he were to be reborn today, would not recognise today's Hinduism as his religion.

And yet, it is also true, that there is a continuity between the *Vedas* and present-day Hinduism. This has to be accepted, if for no other reason than this, that there never has been a clean break between Vedic religion and later Hinduism. *Chaturvarnya*, the parent of the later ramified caste system, goes back to the Vedic period. Further, though idol worship is now the dominant form of Hindu worship, the *Yajna* has not been consigned to oblivion. It continues for some specific rites. So again, the same Indian phenomenon, continuity *and* change.

1. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* there is a negro slave girl who is sold by one master to another many times ever since her birth. So much so, indeed, that she could not imagine that she was ever "born". When asked when she was born, she replied: "I was never born. I just grewed." Ditto, Hinduism.

All the same, a few of the glaring changes must be noted.

The centre of Rig Vedic religion was the *yajna*, the sacrificial fire. In fact, Rig Vedic rites were no religion at all in the accepted sense of the term. The *Rig Veda* has no omnipotent, omniscient God, the Creator and Governor of the world. It has no place for worship, prayer and propitiation by helpless and cringing mortals dependant on His favours for their protection and welfare.

The Vedic *yajna* was what the anthropologists call Magic (in Sanskrit, it is called *yaatu*). It was the *yajna* that was all-powerful, the creator and governor of everything. Even the Vedic Gods, e.g. Indra, Varuna, Mitra, etc. (there was no One God, at that time) were subject to the command and control of *yajna*. They participated in *yajna* rites, and if they violated its rules, they were cursed or became powerless. The belief (faith) of the Rig Vedic people was that if the *yajna* was performed strictly according to prescribed rituals and incantations, the latter, again, recited according to strict rhyme and rhythm, it was bound to bring about the result desired by the performer of the *yajna*. And the result demanded, in the *Rig Veda*, was always robust health, food, progeny, cows, heaven, etc.

There is no *atma*, no *brahma*, no *moksha*, no idol worship in the *Rig Veda*.

And most interestingly, Rig Vedic *rishis* not only ate beef, they feasted on it without the slightest sense of embarrassment, leave aside any feeling of guilt for committing the most unforgivable of all sins, killing and eating the cow.

Then follow the *Upanishads*, dethroning and even reviling the mighty Vedic Gods, and downgrading the *yajna* as the supreme cosmic power. The main quarrel of the Upanishadic *rishis* with those of the Rig Vedic period was that the latter were only bothered about good health, good food, cows and other worldly goods, or, at the most, a trip to heaven, whereas the be-all and end-all of life was to realise the Infinity of the One and Only Brahma (*ekamevaadvitiyam*), as also that of the *atma*, and to merge one's *atma* with the Brahma for attaining eternal liberation (*moksha*). Asceticism and meditation were the means

to that end; not the *yajna*, which after all, only promised the fleeting and corporal pleasures of heaven. A theoretical battle royal went on for a few centuries between the champions of *Poorva Meemansa* (the defenders of the Vedic *yajna*) and of *Uttar Meemansa*, the defenders of Upanishadic, mystical idealism, i.e. Vedanta.

Together with Vedanta came the theory of rebirth and *karma*.

Let us skip over the long period during which Buddhism challenged Upanishadic theories and religion all along the line, but, having itself degenerated, was ultimately defeated by a "new" Hinduism.

And that was the Hinduism, as pointed out earlier, of the *Smritis*, the *Geeta*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*.

Now we get a personalised God, an *avatar*, viz. Krishna, the *avatar* of Vishnu. We also get *bhakti* of the *Geeta*, a simple path of love, devotion and prayer. This was meant particularly for women, vaishyas and shudras, so that they may also attain *moksha*. This aim was denied to them by the *Upanishads*, which advocated only one path to *moksha*, viz. meditation, called the *jnana murg*, which was all Greek and Latin to women, vaishyas and shudras. Idol worship also came in the wake of *bhakti*. Probably, veneration of the cow also, because, Buddhism had vehemently opposed *yajna* and the sacrificing of cows, bullocks, horses, etc. at the *yajna* sacrifices.

Having just "grewed", Hinduism displays a third distinctive feature, viz. that it has been the most self-propelling of all the religions of the world. It has no organised Church, no institutionalised hierarchy like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. It is difficult to imagine the existence and continuation of these three religions without the scaffolding of their churches and hierarchies. Hinduism, certainly, has temples, way-side shrines, and brahmin priests for performing religious rites. It would be wrong to say that Hinduism has no organisation. It has. But it has no institutionalised organisation, controlled and directed by an authority from the top. So, if it has "just grewed", it also "just works". It propells itself without any formal controlling and guiding authority. The great Shankara attempt-

ed to establish such an institution, but it has never been found necessary, and hence, has remained only notional.

How has this clock called Hinduism worked “without winding”, without a “regulator” adjusting its movement, without a “mechanic” “oiling and repairing it” from time to time?

That is the real question, and if we find the answer, there need be no mystique about this strange “way of life”, and the peculiar features of Hinduism will fall in place as natural and inevitable in the socio-economic conditions and circumstances in which Hinduism developed and grew.

Religion is a superstructure. In that capacity, it deals with the relation between man and God. But the superstructure has material roots, and if it were not to strengthen its material foundation, it would not survive as a superstructure.

From this standpoint, what is the historical achievement of Hinduism? (I am not referring here to its role as the spiritual-ideological weapon of the propertied, governing classes, which is a function of all religions.)

In this connection, the first thing that one has to notice is, that unlike the three other religions, Hinduism has been, *ab initio*, a religion of the exploiting, dominating, oppressing classes.

The origin of Christianity was in the misery of the slaves in Rome and their yearning for emancipation. The roots of Buddhism lay in Buddha’s compassion for the downtrodden castes as also his passion for removing their pain and sorrow. Islam arose as a movement for uniting warring tribes by assuring equality to all who recognised only one Allah, and Mohammed as their only Prophet.

What was the origin of Hinduism? It was the “Aryan”, Kshatriya-Brahmin domination over the shudras and vaishyas in the form of *chaturvarnya*.

It can be proved, chapter and verse, that the Vedantic, metaphysical concept of Brahma as the Ultimate, Formless, Eternal, Unchanging, Unthinkable, *Nirguna* Reality developed, *pari*

passu, with the concept of Brahma as the creator and regulator of the social system of *chaturvarnya*. Champions of Vedantic idealism are revolted, like virgins, when this interconnection is brought to their notice. But fact is fact, however "unholy" it may be.

Still further, the theory that every member of every *varna* attains *moksha* (merging into the Brahma), through a series of rebirths, by strictly performing his *varna* duties (called karma in the Hindu scriptures) was also, transparently, a theory worked out by the brahmin-kshatriya establishment in their own class-interest.

In course of time, every religion becomes a tool of the exploiting classes, the opium of the people. But, if one wants to study the distinctive features of Hinduism, that it was such a tool from the very beginning, cannot be overlooked.

So, the development of *chaturvarnya*, not only as a religious institution, but clearly as a socio-economic system of exploitation was a historical contribution of Hinduism.² *The key to the self-propelling nature of Hinduism lies in the self-reproducing character of the caste system with its functional, endogamous basis.*

Proceeding further, the really great achievement of Hinduism was the bringing of numberless primitive tribes from the hunting and foodgathering stage to the stage of settled agriculture, artisanship and handicrafts. This it did, not only by absorbing them as castes in the Hindu fold, but also by helping them improve their productive technique. Land gifts by kings and traders to brahmins and temple-trusts played a very great role in this activity. Our temples of God have been, and continue to be, temples of landlordism, and of vast quantities of gold and money received from devotees which served as capital for trade and usury.

2. The word "contribution" may appear improper for describing a method of exploitation and oppression. But could early tribal Indo-Aryan society advance without the development of *chaturvarnya*? History itself has given the answer. And *chaturvarnya* was undoubtedly a more productive social system than the primitive, pastoral tribal society from which it evolved, despite its exploitative and oppressive character.

This gradual process, spread over centuries and centuries, in its turn, influenced the development of Hinduism as a religion, and helps us to understand some of its distinctive features.

No other religion in the world has succeeded in synthesising a profound faith in the oneness of God with the actual worship of myriads of deities, as Hinduism has done. And it was not as if only the amazingly speculative brahmin priesthood at the top believed in One God while the rustic masses below went on believing in numberless Gods, each group or tribe in its own God.

No. Even in the remotest villages, the most untutored peasant came to believe that God was One but that he could be worshipped in any and all forms, including the one to which he was devoted. The one in the many was a concept carried to the nooks and corners of the country. The *Geeta* calls it "the Undivided in the Divided". And this was done through endless *bhajans*, *kirtans*, *kathas*, *poojas*, *utsavas* and what not. The synthesis was not just a crude patch-up. It went deep into the consciousness and faith of the millions.

How do we explain this? It can only be explained by the necessity of absorbing and assimilating hundreds of tribes with their tribal deities and Gods into the Hindu fold, at the top of which stood probably the most subtle, acutely intellectual, speculative, priesthood in the world, the brahmins. In caste rules, with their endogamy somehow borrowed from tribal life,³ no permissiveness was tolerated. In the deities to be worshipped and the forms of worship, all flexibility was allowed. The tribal deities became the "form" of the monotheistic, sophisticated Hindu Godhood at the top. That was how the custodians of Hinduism solved the problem of bringing various tribes into the Hindu fold, combining unity with diversity.

This process of synthesising mono-theism with poly-theism and pan-theism was expressed in yet another dexterous technique. Of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the

3. This does not mean that caste and tribe were identical. Castes emerged in various ways and due to various reasons, of which the absorption of tribes was one. But endogamy in caste has some connection with endogamy in tribe. This is a question on which a lot of further investigation and research are needed.

last, at least his later attributes, were taken over from the non-Aryan tribes. The Rudra of the *Vedas* was very different from the Shiva-Shankara of the later Hindu period. But innumerable totemic Gods of the backward tribes were also "taken over" as *subordinate deities* of the Hindu Gods. We have Vishnu riding on the Garuda, the mouse before Ganapati, Hanuman before Rama, Yama riding on the buffalo, Nandi before Shiva, the Kalia serpent under Shri Krishna and so on.

One unique feature of Hinduism needs further clarification, and that is, caste. Hinduism is the only religion that has created a distinct social organisation. Like other religions, it has adapted itself to slavery, feudalism and capitalism. But caste has always remained. So much so, that Hinduism is inseparable from caste. If we cannot imagine other religions without their Church and institutionalised hierarchy, Hinduism is inconceivable without caste. So long as Hinduism is there, castes have to be there. And when the caste system ends as a result of inter-caste marriages becoming the universal norm among Hindus, the Hinduism that has "grewed" through centuries and millenia will come to an end or, at any rate, will be transformed beyond recognition.

The castes of Hinduism evolved in various ways.

Class differentiation developed among the primitive Indo-Aryan tribes.

Secondly, any amount of cross-breeding took place between them and the non-Aryan tribes, which no amount of denial by those who boast about "pure Aryan blood" and denounce Varna Sankara, can disprove. Some of this cross-breeding was sanctioned by religion, law and custom (much the same thing in early societies). Sudasa, Divodasa and the Great Rishi Vasishta of the Rig Veda (the last supposed to have been born from a "black jar") were surely not pure Aryans. Cross breeding also took place through the institution of *dasis*, i.e. women slaves in the households of Aryan and upper-varna families. These *dasis* came from non-Aryan tribes or the lower castes. To be a *dasi* was to be a concubine. The progeny of the *dasis* was categorised into various low castes.

Thirdly, the proliferation of handicrafts and trade with the growing means of production also created castes.

And, fourthly, innumerable aboriginal tribes were absorbed into the Hindu fold as castes.

Caste necessarily means endogamy, because, without endogamy, there can be no caste. This brings in the corollary that every Hindu has to be born a Hindu, since, without belonging to a caste, he cannot be a Hindu, and he cannot belong to a caste unless he is born in it.

That is why, whatever may have happened in very ancient times, there is really speaking no provision for an individual entry into Hinduism. This has certainly been so for the last two thousand years. There is no individual entry into Hinduism because you cannot become a Hindu without belonging to a caste, and you cannot belong to a caste unless you are born in it.

Despite the zeal of the Hindu *shuddhi* movement of the last sixty years, the champions of that movement never tell us the caste in which the new *shuddhified* entrant enters. They cannot tell us for the simple reason that no caste will permit an outsider to enter it. The *shuddhi* champions may shout as much as they want but they will not be able to solve one difficulty of the person converted to Hinduism. He will not get a girl to marry for no one will give him his daughter in marriage. So, even granting for the sake of argument, that a single person can be converted to Hinduism, he will have to remain hanging in the air, like Trishanku, neither on earth, nor in heaven.

It is claimed by the BJP leaders that harijans recently converted to Islam at Meenakshipuram were reconverted to Hinduism. May we ask, "which caste did they join on reconversion"? The BJP bosses dare not reply, because they must have returned to the fold of their "mother caste" as untouchables.

To those who speak mystically or nostalgically about Hinduism not being a religion but "a way of life", I will say, "that way of life is caste". And caste means unbridgeable inequality by birth, caste means a society fragmented into a thousand divisions. There, you have your "way of life!"

And all this, when you go to the root, is the result of an extraordinarily slow economic development of society, a mix-up of lingering tribal traditions with a slowly evolving class society, which was never "born" but "just grewed".

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